

Worship 14th March 2021

Aberlour Parish Church

Rev Andrew Kimmitt

Call to Worship

Holy One, we gather this day.
We come as we are
seeking to bridge the gap,
hoping to reach the unreachable.
Accept all we bring before you today.
Accept our worship, we pray.

Prayer

God our God,
Throughout time and history,
from Your eternal glory
You have called through the clamour of a creation too often too busy for you
You have called individuals
Prophets and Kings,
and women of wisdom
You have called communities,
families, and towns, and nations,
and today your call is to everyone, the world over
that they might come to you, and might know your love.

And so we have come.
Come in this time of worship – held in the bonds of your Spirit.

And each of us have come from different contexts,
from different lives,
with different joys and troubles,
with differing aches and strains,
Yet we all come – in need of your healing love.
So heal us Lord
Heal us from the wounds we carry daily
from the weights of daily living – the endless to-do lists,
and the stresses of the week.
Heal us from our worries and anxieties.
let us find in you a time to be still, to breathe afresh,
and to find peace.

“Come to me all who are heavy laden, I will give you rest”

Heal us from the wounds of our strained relationships;
release us from words said that cloy to minds, spinning around on repeat, pulling us down,
ease our pent-up frustration, our hurt and our anger

it is weight we need carry no longer|
and is a risk only to ourselves, and those to whom it might spill out, misdirected
break bonds of hate and apathy, replace them with relationships definted by love.
“Come to me all who are heavy laden, I will you rest”
Heal us from the wounds of our sin,
When we ought to have lived as those worthy to be called your children,
we confess we have not.
In the process, we have hurt others, or neglected to love fully,
and we have hurt ourselves, and failed to see ourselves with the love you show us.
Heal us, that we might grow in your love,
that we might be made in nearer likeness to Christ,
that we might be claimed as your redeemed children.

“Come to me all who are heavy laden, I will you rest”
So we pray, asking your Spirit will be with us as we worship together,
that our days might be blessed, and we know more deeply Christ who taught us all to pray together saying:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is heaven,
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever.
Amen.

Hymn

PSALM 139

- 1 O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down you are before me :
ever the maker and keeper of my days.
- 2 You know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar,
and with love everlasting you besiege me :
in every moment of life or death, you are.
- 3 Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,
you have known its meaning through and through.
You are with me beyond my understanding :
God of my present, my past and future, too.
- 4 Although your Spirit is upon me,
still I search for shelter from your light.
There is nowhere on earth I can escape you :
even the darkness is radiant in your sight.
- 5 For you created me and shaped me,
gave me life within my mother’s womb.
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you :
safe in your hands, all creation is made new.

from Psalm 139
Bernadette Farrell (b. 1957)

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Reading – Luke 16:19-31

16¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’

²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’

²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Reflection (1)

As we continue our journey through Luke’s gospel, we’ve come to what we might call a ‘difficult’ passage. This is sort of passage that gives preachers an anxiety about how to approach it in reflections and sermons.

And that’s partly because, as a story of Jesus’s, it is almost surreal in the images it paints, the themes it touches upon, the questions it appears to raise. And it’s also partly because what it’s really about, underneath it all, is money. And who really likes thinking and talking about money?

Yet this passage comes from a chapter that is all about money, and all about right relationship with money. Just before this passage we have the parable of the unjust steward, with Jesus’ famous conclusion: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

And so then we get this story of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar.

In my reflections on this story I came across a sermon from 1955, on this passage, preached by Dr Martin Luther King Jr. I’ve linked to it on the website and facebook posts of this worship service, and to be honest, if you wanted to just stop watching or listening here and read Martin Luther King’s sermon instead I’d be delighted. Really. Go for it, and do it now if you want!

But assuming you’ve stayed, I’ll summarise some of the things Martin Luther King preached about this passage.

First, he points out that— despite its apparent setting – “we must not take this story as a theology of the after life. It is not a travel guide to the next world. Its symbols are symbols and not literal fact. He points out that Jesus often referred to the Hereafter as a reality, but never sought to give detailed descriptions of it – and that if we try to fashion a theology of the afterlife from Jesus’ word we attempt to make what has been given to us as mystery (for how could we understand the conditions of eternal life?) and make of it a cheap human idol. “If we seek to describe the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell, we take the mystery out of religion and incarcerate it in the walls of an illogical logic”.

I think that’s an important point to make. So instead, let’s get the picture of the story clear in our minds.

There are two main characters, and they occupy two main scenes.

IN the first scene we're introduced to the characters in this world. There's the rich man, who dresses in the finest clothes. We're told he wears purple – which is, in those times, an astonishingly expensive dye. Often purple cloth is reserved for royalty, or the very rich aristocrats. And indeed, the rich man lives in a palatial home, eating fine food to huge excess.

And then we have described the poor beggar at the Rich man's gates. Not only living in dire poverty, but sick with skin sores that ooze and weep, too weak to push away the dogs that lick at his wounds. And yet this man, whose circumstances are so tragic that he would consider himself fortunate just to receive the crumbs from the Rich man's table – has, in Jesus' telling, the dignity of a name: Lazarus.

There's an interesting thing about that name. Lazarus was the Greek version of the Hebrew name Eleazar. In Genesis, Abraham's chief steward, his right-hand-man, was called Eliezer.

And so; when we get to the next scene; we find that it is Lazarus, in an echo of that Eliezer from Genesis, who is held in the arms of Abraham.

The Rich man is in torment, with flames scorching him. And yet – as if the rich man hasn't learned anything at all, he has the gall and temerity to ask Abraham to order Lazarus to do his bidding, to come and give – even a drop of cool water. Just a drop – a cruel inversion of the 'just a crumb' that Lazarus would've taken from the Rich man's table before. Father Abraham's response is damning:

'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'

It's that great chasm, that is interesting. The uncrossable barrier; the impassable gulf. What had created this eternal chasm between the rich man and Lazarus?

Well Martin Luther King didn't think it was the fact he was rich and Lazarus was poor, per se. That points to an inequality that should be lamented; but Abraham, in this story the high steward of heaven, was noted in Genesis as the richest man of his day. So it can't be that wealth – in and of itself – is condemnable. Jesus does say that it's harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter heaven; but that was in reply to the young rich man who grieved at the idea of having to sell everything to be made perfect. And he follows it up with the reminder that while such things are humanly impossible, with God all things are possible.

But that can't mean that there is a carte blanche for the world's 'haves' in relation to the world's 'have-nots'. Maybe there's something in Jesus' teaching that – those to whom much has been given, much is expected'.

So if wealth, in and of itself, isn't the cause of the great barrier between the rich man and Lazarus – what is?

Hymn

- 1 Heaven shall not wait
for the poor to lose their patience,
the scorned to smile, the despised to find a friend:
Jesus is Lord;
he has championed the unwanted;
in him injustice confronts its timely end.
- 2 Heaven shall not wait
for the rich to share their fortunes,
the proud to fall, the élite to tend the least:
Jesus is Lord;
he has shown the master's privilege —
to kneel and wash servants' feet before they feast.

- 3 Heaven shall not wait
for the dawn of great ideas,
thoughts of compassion divorced from cries of pain :
Jesus is Lord ;
he has married word and action ;
his cross and company make his purpose plain.
- 4 Heaven shall not wait
for triumphant Hallelujahs,
when earth has passed and we reach another shore :
Jesus is Lord
in our present imperfection ;
his power and love are for now ; and then for evermore.

John L. Bell (*b.* 1949) and Graham Maule (*b.* 1958)

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Reflection (2)

If it's not the simple fact of being wealthy, then what is the sin of the rich man? Why has a great uncrossable chasm been set up between him and Lazarus.

We might suggest that this is the permanent and eternal version of a chasm that had existed in a temporary worldly sense before. The Rich man was rich; Lazarus was poor and sick. And the rich man's sin was to recognise the chasm between their circumstances, but not to challenge it. He saw the gulf that existed and he accepted unchallenged as the way the world just is and therefore should be.

And as we see, when we accept the injustices of the world as simple fact, or worse the way things should be, something terrible has happened.

The sin of unchallenged injustice is the sin of not seeing a fellow human as brother or sister, the rich man's sin is being concerned only with himself, his own wealth and consumption. It's the sin of losing capacity to sympathize. In Martin Luther King's words:

“The Rich Man's wealth had made him cold and calculating; it had blotted out the warmth of compassion. The Rich Man could look at men crushed by the battering rams of circumstance and not be moved. The Rich Man could watch hungry fellowmen smothering in the air-tight cage of poverty and not be moved. The Rich Man could watch his brothers being blown asunder by the chilly winds of adversity and not be moved. He saw men hungry and fed them not; he saw men sick and visited them not; he saw men naked and clothed them not. And so he was not fit for the Kingdom of God.

The Rich Man sin was not that he was cruel to Lazarus, but that he refused to bridge the gap of misfortune that existed between them. The Rich Man sin was not his wealth; his

wealth was his opportunity. His sin was his refusal to use his wealth to bridge the chasm between the extremes of superfluous, inordinate wealth and abject, deadening poverty.

So when The Rich Man cries to Abraham to send him one drop of water at Lazarus' hands, Abraham replies: "There is a fixed chasm between you now." There was a time that The Rich Man could have bridged the chasm. He could have used the engineering power of love to build a bridge of compassion between him and Lazarus. But he refused.

Now the chasm is fixed. The chasm is now an impassable chasm. Time has run out. The tragic words, too late, must now be, marked across the history of The Rich Man' life.”

...

There is, of course, another chasm. Another chasm which is impossible to bridge in human terms. But with God all things are possible.

And that is the chasm between God and humanity.

And the relationship between God's richness and our poverty of spirit stands in the starkest of contrasts to the relationship of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

The beauty of the Christian gospel is that God, the divine omnipotent Rich Man is not like the Rich Man of the parable. God is always seeking to bridge the gulf. God is not so selfish that God overlooks others. The Christian God is some static heavenly being, resting in eternal peace 'somewhere up there' but an ever loving God who in creation has moved out of God's-self to create and care for us. God does not think that the gulf that exists between Divine and human is a proper condition of life. So at the climax of the Christian gospel we find God in Christ bridging the gulf.

As we approach Easter, we approach the revelation of the triumph of God's bridge to overcome the chasm of sin, evil and death.

The story doesn't end here. It ends only as it is reproduced in our human lives. "As I loved you, so you must love on another." In other words, God is saying, "As I have

bridged the chasm between humanity and God, so bridge you the chasm between this person and that person. Each of us is a potential Rich Man, whether in material goods, in education, rich in community standing, rich in influence, rich in charm, rich in service. And if we don't see our richness in our own community, we are certainly rich in the global sense. At our gate stands some poor Lazarus who has been deprived of all of these. There is a chasm. But

the chasm can be bridged by love and compassion. Let us commit to bridging the chasm before it becomes too late.

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Hymn

1. Show me how to stand for justice
How to work for what is right
How to challenge false assumptions
How to walk within the light
May I learn to share more freely
In a world so full of greed
Showing Your immense compassion
By the life I choose to lead

2. Teach my heart to treasure mercy
Whether given or received
For my need has not diminished
Since the day I first believed
Let me seek no satisfaction
Boasting of what I have done
But rejoice that I am pardoned
And accepted in Your Son

3. Gladly I embrace a lifestyle
Modelled on Your living word
In humility submitting
To the truth which I have heard
Make me conscious of Your presence
Every day in all I do
By your Spirit's gracious prompting
May I learn to walk with You

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Prayer

God of all love and all creation,

As our heavenly parent, you offer unconditional eternal loves that breaks through all barriers.
You will us to be with you in the end, just as you were with us in the beginning – the one who knit us together in our mother's wombs.

This Mothering Sunday, we take time to thank you for our origins and our creation: all those who have nurtured and cared for us along the way.

And we pray knowing that this is not an easy day for many.

So while we thank you – and thank you wholeheartedly, for loving mothers and loving children: and celebrate with those for whom today is a time of joy and connection and love, we remember the many others who struggle – for whatever reason.

We pray for those whose relationships with mothers has been one of strain or tension. We pray for children who have known abuse, children from whom motherly love has been withheld or warped.

We pray for those who never knew mothers. In Aberlour, we remember the many children who grew up in St Margaret's Orphanage – and commit to a society where nurturing love is offered to all.

We pray for Children – of all ages – who cling to memories of memories mothers now passed. May memories bring comfort, even as the act of remembering is tinged with grief.

We pray for Mothers for whom today is twinged with pain or sorrow.

We pray for Mothers whose children are now in your heavenly care – and we name the pain and grief of women who have experienced miscarriage, still birth, infant death. Where stigma or social pressure prevents honest and healing conversations about the realities of child-death; God give light, care, and healing.

This weekend, God, we mark 25 years since the killing of 16 young children and their teacher in a school gym in Dunblane. The reverberations of shock, grief and outrage continue to resonate throughout our nation and beyond. At the centre of it all are families whose lives and hearts were torn by senseless violence. Be with all those whose memories of that day are carried as scars of the time when nothing would ever be the same again.

We pray for Mothers estranged from their children. Where there is unfulfilled desire for a closer relationship. Where a phonecall, or scrap of news would be a welcome crumb of comfort. God who builds bridges, give reconciliation.

We pray for women who have longed to be mothers but aren't, and the complexities of emotion that this day brings to those where the lotteries of circumstance leave dreams unfulfilled. Give your comfort.

God you are the one in whom all creation finds a mother.

Fulfil the needs of all your children, and may we live out your love as brothers, sisters, siblings who love each other.

Amen.

Hymn

1 Mothering God You gave me birth
In the bright morning of this world
Creator source of every breath
You are my rain my wind my sun

2 Mothering Christ You took my form
Offering me Your food of light
Grain of life and grape of love
Your very body for my peace

3 Mothering Spirit nurt'ring one
In arms of patience hold me close
So that in faith I root and grow
Until I flow'r until I know

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Henry Percy Smith | Jean Janzen

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Blessing

May we tighten the laces of our shoes
and walk out together,
to be a friend to the friendless,
to share what we have with those who have nothing,
to love those who have forgotten what love feels like.

And may God's love,
Christ's call
and the Spirit's inspiration
be with you in this journey
and for all eternity. Amen