September 28th

The new Shofar

*Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can – **John Wesley.***

Do not ignore the reality of Hell!

The parable does not answer a key question: why did Dives end up in hell? It was not for something he did. It was for what he failed miserably to do. He took all the world could offer and forgot about everyone else. He was blinded by the baubles and the seductive pleasures and by his presumption that he had earned the right to enjoy them on his own. His life was all about himself. That is what earned him a place in the eternal fires of Hades.

One important entry point into this parable is to note how only Lazarus has a name. The rich man is just a rich man (dives is Latin for rich). The poor man is named Lazarus which is El-azar in Hebrew – *God has helped*. This is the key to our reading. One man is all about himself, what he can create for himself, his status in the world, how others see him. The other is about living under the divine will in patient confidence. At the end of the parable, we see the consequences of their chosen way of life – the rich man ends up in the eternal fires of hell, while the poor man feasts in the banquet of heaven. In the next life, their status is reversed with God ensuring that the righteous are blessed and justice is given to the sinners.

There is something impressive about Lazarus. He remains silent. He does not murmur against the injustices he endures, complain about the uneven and unfair way in which God distributes wealth, or even whinge about the abuse he endures at the hands of the rich man. In the next life he does not exult over the change in status between himself and the rich man. He does not even comment on the suggestion he become an errand boy and bring water down into the fires of Hades to ease the suffering of his former tormentor or run errands to the rich man's brothers.

The problem is never wealth

The Bible does not have a problem with people being wealthy. It is possible to be wealthy and to enjoy God's favor—Abraham, David, and Solomon serve as examples. The question is not whether we have money, but whether we love money (see 1 Timothy 6:10)—whether we share God's concern for the poor and vulnerable—whether we are too preoccupied with personal concerns, the million and one little things that demand so much of our time and energy that we fail to notice the Lazarus in our midst?

Nor does Jesus suggest that all poor people are righteous and will inherit eternal life in heaven. Poverty of the kind Lazarus endured is never good. Suffering miserably in this world is not a guarantee of heaven, and heaven is never about what we achieve in this life. In the end, it is all about how we live under God. The choices that we make on our pilgrimage from birth to death.

The Pharisees are examples of where good people can go wrong

The parable illustrates the mastery of Jesus as a storyteller. The gate is there to symbolizes the distance that separates Lazarus from this rich man's world. Lazarus not only has no gate—he does not even have a house! Lying just outside the rich man's gate, he is physically separated from the rich man's house by only a few meters, but the rich man's world may as well be another planet for Lazarus.

The Pharisees can hardly miss that the parable is aimed at them. They were well known for seeing their prosperity as God's reward for their good conduct. But Jesus does not see it that way. He warns that, if they are like the rich man in life, they will be like him in death. It speaks of a great reversal that challenges their theology that wealth is a sign of God's favor and poverty a sign of God's displeasure.

When the rich man does finally think of others, it is limited. Having given up the possibility of helping himself, he finally begins to think of others—but only of his brothers. He shows no concern for neighbours—and certainly none for down-and-outers from outside the gate! He remains narrowly focussed. He says he has five brothers when in fact he should have said six – Lazarus was the brother he still failed to acknowledge. If only he had chosen to live according to the divine law for it is in that Law that God made clear the parallels between love of the poor and love of God.

It is all about God – doing God's will, whatever the cost

The clearest expression of the rich man's rejection of the Law was his neglect of Lazarus. He did not even notice him sitting there at the gateway of his house. There is a saying in the Talmud (a compendium of Jewish teaching) that says *whoever turns away his eyes from one who appeals for charity is considered as if he were serving idols.* The parable rightly acknowledges that so set in their godless ways are they, so confident of their righteousness that even if someone was to return from the grave, they would not be prepared to listen to him.

The Call to Compassion and Action

The story of this rich man highlights the call for compassion and active engagement in addressing social injustices. Sitting back and ignoring or walking past is not an option for Christians. This parable challenges individuals and communities to move beyond mere sympathy for the suffering and to take tangible actions to alleviate their hardships. This broader meaning encourages a proactive approach to charity and social responsibility, urging believers to embody the principles of love and service that are central to their faith. It should leave us asking: how do I/we respond, in real terms to the "Lazarus" at our gates? As the rich man learned, the consequences of failure are too horrendous to contemplate, but the choice is always our own to make.