

Now is the time. Later is too late. Luke 16. 19 – end
Beverley Minster 25.9.15 HC
(Trinity 18)

Some people love a good argument. They are never happier than when putting a contrary point of view, saying their piece, having a go. Some people will start a discussion, or make a complaint almost out of nothing, as if peace and quiet and calm and agreement is boring, and really we should be engaging in fierce debate about just about everything. If you are not one of those people, you will know someone, perhaps be very close to someone, who is. I don't think I'm one of them, preferring harmony to dissension. But sometimes...

What kind of person was Jesus? An instant poll of people in the street would, I bet, produce the majority view along the songs some people learnt as children: 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'; 'Jesus's hands were kind hands'; 'little Lord Jesus no crying he makes'. Really bad religious art has a soft focus Jesus with a glossy beard and a *Ready Brek* glow, with adoring people hanging on his every word. Yes? No. When Jesus walked into a situation he changed it, disrupted it, challenged it, provoked it. There are countless arguments and disputes, often started by Jesus himself.

I read an article this week accusing the Bishops of the Church of England retreating into 'nervous silence'. Not so Jesus in the Gospels. He deliberately picks fights at times.

I'm not sure whether this is the only mission technique we should use. But confidence and challenge is what I see in Jesus. Relentless niceness isn't always the way. People need to be taken on and faced up to, sometimes. They certainly do about the company they keep and what they do with their money. And when I say they, I do mean me, and you.

This year we have been reading through Luke's Gospel each week, and in the last few weeks we've seen Jesus eating with the very rich, the very holy, the very poor and the very sinful. Predictably the rich and holy complain, in their superior way, that Jesus has been contaminated by the company he keeps: the poor and sinful will drag him down. How could they trust someone who 'welcomes sinners and eats with them'? (Luke 15. 2). Mistake. Cue two chapters of story after story where Jesus skewers the rich and self-satisfied. 'The lovely stories about the lost sheep, coin and son – the prodigal son – are all about God searching for the lost. And they are provocative. So who's lost? The problem with the rich and self-satisfied is that they don't know it's them, as well as the poor and sinful, who do. They think they are ok.

So Jesus slices them open with stories, showing them that their attitude to money will define their future. The parable of the shrewd, or dishonest, manager precedes today's reading. It talks about someone who, who, having skimmed off money from his boss's business transactions, cooked the books a little more to ensure that when he was sacked he'd have friends who owed him. He made use of what he had now to ensure his future.

Jesus does not commend his practice: he was an illustration, not an example. Jesus calls us to work out what to do with our money, and whether by giving it away we can show that we control our money and it doesn't control us. He says to the rich: you know how money makes you do things, and how you use it to gain influence and power and a false sense of security. Why not use it to secure yourself eternally? And that means acting honestly.

Jesus then goes on to consider not just our money but our lifestyle and actions, and tells a story about what happens to a rich man and a poor man after they die. (this is a 'pearly gates' story. It doesn't describe the geography of heaven and hell). Jesus makes the point again and again that the rich have got more things in between them and God. They can mistake their money for God, because their possessions give them all they think they need. The noise of their money in their heads is so loud that they don't hear the voice of God. It's easier then for God to come to the aid of the poor, because they cry out and there's less money noise in their heads. The name 'Lazarus' means 'God helps'.

In the story the rich man doesn't care about the poor man. They are rich and poor even in death: the rich man can afford a grave, and the poor man can't – Jesus makes a lovely point about the vultures picking his bones clean being like angels taking him to heaven. The rich man gets his come-uppance, because he wakes up in Hades, the hot place. He can see the poor man having a lovely time...even then he remembers that he used to order people about and, in Downton Abbey style he 'sends for' Lazarus to bring

him a drink, and even when he starts thinking about others – his family who are still alive – he still wants Lazarus ‘sent’ back to earth to warn them.

Jesus’s point here is that what we do in this life will have eternal consequences, and our actions now will reveal in whom we trust. Now is the time. Later will be too late. This is an illustration rather than a detailed theology. The story is there to make us think. We have a life to live now, and Jesus is absolutely clear that what we do with it will affect our eternal life. What we do now, how we are now, whom we trust now, will be the crucial factor in how we are welcomed into God’s presence after death. Jesus is absolutely clear that we have all the information we need to be making that decision now. His hearers had enough even then – everything written in Moses and the prophets. We have even more. So listen – and don’t wait until it’s too late.

This is a story, a parable, about now. And it’s not offered mystically, in soft focus, meek and mild. It’s drilled home. Learn **humility**, says Jesus. Be **charitable**, and look out for the needs of people who have more obvious needs than you. As a friend of mine put it recently, this is not about the rich condescending to the poor. It’s the needy who have lots sharing with the needy who have little. More than that, get rid of **false distinctions of class** and power. The rich man carries on trying to be rich even in torment, even when he can see that Lazarus should never have been ordered about in the first place. Treat people **equally**. And finally: do it now. Later is too late.

What follows from this will be up to you. But something must. What are your possessions doing to show that you trust God alone? What do your actions reveal of what you think about others? And if a change is required, what will it be? Jesus says that everything depends on how you live. And in him – provocatively, argumentatively - are the words of eternal life.