

Now is the time. Later is too late.

Luke 16. 19 – end
Beverley Minster 29.9.13 (Trinity 18)

Give yourself a moment sometime today, get out your Bible (if you've not got one steal one of ours – we've got loads), and read chapters 12 – 18 of Luke's Gospel. I've had quite a time in these last few weeks, preaching on passages I don't think I've preached on before (interesting really, as the lectionary repeats itself every three years, and we've been using it since 1997). But I've been challenged again and again by how direct and uncompromising Jesus is. He looks at his hearers, whether they were his followers or his opponents, and tells it straight. The headline over all these passages might read: How you live now will affect your future.

Last week we heard about the shrewd, or dishonest manager, 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. I said last week that Jesus wasn't commending his practice: he was an illustration, not an example. And I invited you to work out what you were going to do with your money, and whether by giving it away you could show that you were controlling your money and it wasn't controlling you. If you've not done anything about your giving to the Minster, do it now. Change your standing order – the statistics show that they remain static, and I'm sure your circumstances have changed.

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. You need to know that the rich get a hard time in Luke: he likes the poor. But that was Jesus's point: the rich have got more things in between them and God, and 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. But: if you're looking for a clue about what heaven and hell are really like – will there be flames and torture, and angels and a chasm? – this is not the place to find it. Again this is an illustration rather than a detailed theology. Jesus is in fact using a standard type of story or joke from near eastern culture – the rich man/poor man story is originally from Egypt. We'll learn as much about life after death from this as we would from the standard 'pearly gates' jokes which preachers sometimes tell. You'll have picked up that I don't tell many such jokes, but I did remember one which illustrates the point.

A couple in their eighties are both killed in a tragic car crash. They immediately arrive at the "pearly gates" where St. Peter welcomes them and shows them to their home. It's absolutely beautiful, a brand new home with all the amenities and right on a golf course. The couple are delighted and can't believe how wonderful everything is. The man asks St. Peter, "So can we really golf on that golf course?"

"Of course!" St. Peter replies. "It's always a perfect day here in heaven and we have ways of working things out so no one ever has to wait." And the club house has fabulous food, and you can eat as much as you like." "You mean, we can just go out there and use the course right now?" "Absolutely. Why don't you go right now and give it a spin? And here, you'll need some new golf clubs."

St. Peter hands the couple two perfectly crafted sets of golf clubs, which of course are the perfect size and fit for each of them. Noticing how young and spry they both feel, the couple puts their clubs into the back of the golf cart, which is providentially waiting for them, and they head to the first hole. The man steps up to make his first swing in heaven, when his mood suddenly turns completely sour and his face falls.

"Darling, what's wrong?" asks the woman. "How can you be so unhappy all of a sudden? Everything here is perfect!" "Yeah, it is perfect," says the man. "And if it hadn't been for that low fat high fibre fish oil diet you put me on, I could have been here twenty years ago."

I don't know whether there is golf in heaven – for some of you it would be hell if there were. But 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 know, 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. 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 are the words of eternal life.