

# **Year C Proper 21**

## **Luke 16:19-31**

The following article appeared on the BBC news website recently.

“At the south-western tip of California, straddling the dirty trickle that is the Tijuana river, stands a wall - or rather a series of walls, fences and ditches. This is the stuff of Donald Trump's dreams, only his wall would be bigger and better of course, not to mention longer, stronger and vastly more expensive. Between the fortifications, in what is effectively no-man's land, a yellow

line painted on the concrete marks the end of the mainland United States and the beginning of Mexico. The border here owes its defences to Operation Gatekeeper, a controversial programme enacted in 1994 under President Bill Clinton which built barriers, added patrols and spruced up technology such as movement sensors.

All these years on, it appears to have worked, up to a point. "It's like water," says border agent Shawn Moran as he drives the route near San Diego which he has patrolled for two decades. "They're going to take the path of least resistance and right now there's a lot

of resistance out here.” Border patrol officer Shawn Moran supports Trump for his stance on immigration. Elsewhere the frontier looks very different. In Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, says Mr Moran, "you still have wide open areas of wilderness and desert where people are able to get across”. That is if they don't die trying. Donald Trump reckons he has the answer - a "beautiful" wall spanning all four states which border Mexico.”<sup>1</sup>

There is something in the human psyche that finds comfort in walls, boundaries, divisions. Robert Frost in his poem Mending

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-36375011>

Wall wrote; “Good fences make good neighbors”.<sup>2</sup> The parable we are considering this morning is all about division and its consequences. We are introduced to an unnamed rich man (traditionally called Dives but not identified in the text) who lives a life of luxury behind a gated property. We would expect to be told his name, after all he was clearly important, dressed in royal purple. Instead we are told the name of the poor man, Lazarus, a hint at who will find honour and significance in this story. He is the only named individual in any of Jesus’ parables.

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<sup>2</sup> Frost, R. 1995 “Mending Wall” in *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* New York: Library of America

He lives outside the gate, beyond the wall, and he is entirely ignored by the rich man. The parable goes on and both men die. The poor man is left to rot and the angels take him. The rich man is given the honour of a burial. The rich man goes to Hades, the place of the dead, and the poor man goes to be with the father of faith, Abraham. Between them is a great chasm that cannot be bridged. Effectively a boundary, a wall that cannot be crossed. That chasm is a terrible outcome for the rich man and has implications for his loved ones back at home who fail to heed the warnings of the prophets

at their peril. So what do we make of this? It is best to follow the story through the perspective of the rich man, for he is the main character and it is to his ilk that the warnings of the parable are addressed.

I remember a few years ago welcoming a missionary from India who was touring Scotland to encourage awareness of the work in the slum communities of New Delhi. There is one image from all that she shared that has stuck in my head. She described a typical middle class Indian family in their car driving along a main road in the city to the shopping precincts down town. To their

right was a wall and beyond the wall the slum communities sprawled out for as far as the eye could see. If you were to ask the family to pull in to the side of the road and to ask them what they thought of the slums to their right, they would look at you in puzzlement; “what slums?”. They are so caught up in the bubble of their lives that they do not see the need that is around them. The rich man is not actively cruel to the poor man. He does not beat him or abuse him. He merely does not see him. There is no recognition whatsoever. We live in the information age; an age of instant

communications. It is easy to find out information on practically any subject at the click of a mouse. We are bombarded with news from across the world, presenting opportunities for engagement with critical issues, and yet we so often sit tight. We do not hear and we do not see what is right in front of us. There is an intriguing passage in Augustine's Confessions when he analyses his own reaction to plays that depict tragic events. As a spectator he welcomed sad feelings; he enjoyed the emotion of sadness as part of the entertainment package, a bit like when we go to the movies and enjoy a



weepy film. Augustine went on; “How real is the mercy evoked by fictional dramas? The listener is not moved to offer help, but merely invited to feel sorrow.”<sup>3</sup> Now, I wonder if that effect is replicated among us in our lives. We are moved to feel sorrow but not moved to offer help as our finger touches the button that changes the TV channel.

The rich man in the parable was not a bad man. He was not cruel or abusiveness, he just didn't see what was straight in front of him. Luke in his Gospel told stories about wealth causing blindness. He recorded the

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine 1998 *The Confessions* trans. Boulding New York: Vintage Books

song of Mary, Jesus' mother, in the first chapter, and Jesus preaching his sermon on the plain in chapter six, both declaring a reversal of fortunes that the kingdom will bring. Those who have suffered in need are made full, and those who have partied in excess are left empty.

The parable moves on and after death, the rich man looked across the chasm and saw Abraham with Lazarus by his side. What did he do? He pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus across to him. He was in no position to make demands. He had no right to treat Lazarus as his slave. But still, he

does not acknowledge Lazarus. He does not speak to Lazarus; he does not see Lazarus as a person, merely a servant to be used. Wealth can cause blindness. Stepping out of privilege is the most difficult journey of transformation for anyone. How high are the walls we have built? Robert Frost observes in his poem *Mending Wall*; “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out.”<sup>4</sup> You know we might be good at building walls between one another but the lesson of this parable is that walls are ultimately between God and ourselves and

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<sup>4</sup> op. cit.

not one another. In the parable of the sheep and the goats recorded in Matthew 25, Jesus effectively becomes Lazarus. He is the one who is lying hungry by the door. He is the one who is imprisoned and marginalised. What are we going to do with Christ in a state like that? Will we even see him beyond the mess of human distress?

Abraham is the father of faith and Lazarus' presence beside him presents the predicament of the rich man in sharp focus. If you live without faith then there are consequences. If your friends and family live without faith then there are consequences

for them too. Faith is not presented as a mental assent to truth but instead as an active response to need. If we can't see that then even a man rising from the dead isn't going to make any difference!

I would like to finish with a story about seeing a need and daring to dream that it might be met.

On the twenty-eight of August, 1963, a Baptist pastor stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC ready to deliver a speech. A crowd of more than 200,000 people stretched out in front of him. I imagine he was filled with both excitement

and fear. He began delivering the speech he had prepared, but midway through it he put his notes aside and spoke from the very depths of his heart. There in the open air, on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, Dr Martin Luther King gave what many regard as the greatest sermon of the twentieth century.

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the

sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its

governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification — one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”



We have to remember how audacious King's dream was. To many it seemed an impossible dream. It was a dream forged in a country where blacks and whites were segregated by custom and law, where the rivers of division ran so deep it seemed foolishness to suggest they could be overcome.

But for this Baptist pastor standing at the Lincoln memorial in front of 200,000 people it was a possible dream because it was God's dream. King was convinced that God dreamed of a world where the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners sit down together at the table of brotherhood,

and that in the civil rights movement the Spirit of God was at work bringing this world into being.<sup>5</sup>

So what is God dreaming about today? Maybe the rich man walking to his wall and throwing his gate wide open and welcoming the poor man to his banqueting table. Let's make that dream a reality.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/kingdom-of-god/>