We have all seen him. He lies on a pile of newspapers outside a shop doorway, covered with a rough blanket, maybe with a shopping trolley nearby full with all his possessions. Maybe rummaging through the wastebins. He wasn’t there when I was a boy but he’s there now and in all our cities. May be less so in New Zealand than in other countries I travel to, and maybe less so in Dunedin than in Auckland, Wellington or Christchurch, but still there.

And as I see him I hear voices. Its his own fault they say. He’s chosen it. There are agencies to help him. He should go and get a job. If we give him money he’ll only spend it on drink or drugs. Stay away – he might be violent. Sometimes in some places the police will move him on, exporting the problem somewhere else, but he’ll be back.

So we all know Lazarus. He is our neighbour. Some of us may be rich, well dressed and well fed, but walk past him without even noticing; others of us may not be so rich, or so finely clothed and fed but compared with Lazarus we are well off. He would be glad to change places with us, and we would be horrified to share his life, even for a day.

Few words have been bandied about more freely in the past 50 years or so than the word equality. Economic equality, race equality, gender equality – such concerns have dominated political and international agendas. It is ironic indeed that for much of my lifetime the world was divided between the communist East and American West, for the Communist Manifesto and American Constitution have the word ‘equality’ in common. The one falls for fair shares for all, the other for a fair chance for all, but both are fundamentally agreed that justice is essentially about equality.

That being so, I suppose there are few stories that Jesus ever told which have quite the same obvious relevance to our 21st c social conscience than the story of Lazarus and the rich man. Here is Jesus comment on the problem of inequality in our human society.

It is the story of two men who lived side by side but inhabiting completely different worlds and having completely different destinies. There is a parallelism in Jesus’ parable which continues this social distance throughout, symbolised first by the gate, then by the distance (far away) and finally the great chasm fixed between them.

Of the two men the first was phenomenally wealthy. It is a sad thing when the only obituary a person can have is the bold statement that he was rich, but that is the only thing Jesus can find for this chap. Tells us he dressed expensively – got his clothes from a fashion designer not a department store. He feasted sumptuously every day. And his dwelling was ostentatious – he live behind an electronically operated security gate with his burglar alarms well installe. Material prosperity oozed out of every pore of this man then – but that is all we are told. Nothing about his friends, family, achievements – just rich. The story implies is something tragic about someone can be summed up like that.

The second man could not have been more different. Jesus paints a picture of abject poverty as extreme as the rich man’s opulence. He was laid at his gate – a gentle translation, the original literally says thrown. Sprawled there to face the sneering contempt of passers by. He had no fine clothes . The only things that covered his back were untreated sores. He would have longed for even the scraps of food that fell off the rich man’s table but the only compassion he received was from the mangy mongrels of the street who licked his sores. Just as in the tale of the lost son in the previous chapt Jesus uses the companionship of animals to emphasise how low this fellow had got. Again a picture not that unusual in our society.
Notice that whereas it says the rich man was buried, honoured in death by a funeral, Lazarus did not. In the Jewish tradition to be refused burial, left exposed to the scavenging wild life, was tantamount to bearing the curse of God. So it seems.

But there was one thing however that this poor man had which the rich man did not. Something easily missed! What?.........

A name. Only person in all of Jesus’ parables to be given a name. Why? Because in the context of this story the name is significant. You see you need a name only if you are known to somebody. A name is an instrument of personal relationship. To know somebody’s name is to distinguish that individual from the crowd. Why feel so good someone remembers our name, can feel hurt they don’t. To have a name is to be a person, to be significant, to matter to somebody. The rich man has no name. As far as Jesus is concerned his name is irrelevant. For he was rich, nothing else. Other people didn’t feature on his agenda and as a result he didn’t feature on theirs. Just a faceless millionaire.

The poor man however was not anonymous, he has a name given by Jesus. And the name is significant. Lazarus is Eleazar, and it means “he whom God helps”. No one else did, certainly not the rich man, and so he had nowhere else to look for help except to God. And God helped him.

Here then are two totally unequal men – the one with wealth but no identity, and the other utterly poor, yet known personally to God. Who really was rich? Who was poor? Who would you rather be?

And that brings us to the second aspect of the story. The two men have very different destinies. Lazarus with Abraham and the rich man in Hades… being tormented. Need to note this is a parable and therefore not to be read literally and Jesus clearly accommodating himself to conventional Jewish ideas about the afterlife. Indeed scholars have discovered a story quite similar to this one, originating in Egypt, that was popular among Jews in Palestine in the 1st c. So therefore unwise to press the details of this account of the afterlife too far, as indeed it is with any of the metaphorical language and images used for it in the NT.

At the same time seems to me Jesus would not use a story like this if he didn’t intend to endorse at least the critical points it suggests. That physical existence is not the end of our stories; that our personalities survive death; that there is a distinction between human beings at death.

That of course is a very sobering observation. People sometimes remark that death is the great equaliser. The famous words of Thomas Grey’s Elegy:

\[ \text{The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,} \\
\text{And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,} \\
\text{Awaits alike th'inevitable hour,} \\
\text{The paths of glory lead but to the grave} \]

It is true, of course that death recognises no class distinctions; it mocks them by its grim indiscrimination. Yet this story does not speak of death as equalising people’s fortunes. It portrays rather a great reversal of fortune. Society beyond the grave is no more egalitarian than this according to Jesus, it is split by a barrier more uncrossable than any class or caste division. Perhaps more real than Grey’s elegy is the following quip. An epitaph on a grave read: “Remember friend as you pass by, as you are now so once was I, as I am now soon you will be. Prepare for death and follow me.” To which someone had added “To follow you I’m not content, until I know which way you went.”

One of the common features of almost all religions is saying in one way or another that injustices will be put right in the next life if they are not in this. Indeed if this is not so then life and the universe itself is indeed unjust but religions, including Christianity, assure us that justice will be seen to then if not now.

We need to be careful in analysing why the fates of the rich man and poor man were so different. Some are tempted to read into it a quasi Marxist critique of economic disparity in society, a
spiritualization of the victory of the working classes over the exploitative bourgeoisie. But out of keeping with the story.

There is not a hint in this story that wealth per se is wrong. Jesus is not suggesting that the afterlife exercises some kind of positive class discrimination toward the poor. Indeed one element proves that – the presence of Abraham on the right side of the gap. No one could ever claim Abraham poor, representative of the down trodden. He very wealthy and powerful by the end of his life. So the rich man did not get his just deserts simply because he rich. Something else going on.

Basic principle of Biblical interpretation is to keep looking at the context for meaning. Do that discover that all the earlier part of ch 16 devoted to subject of wealth. Jesus stresses how important it is that we treat wealth as a trust, something we’re responsible for using wisely. Stresses in v11 and 12 the importance of being trustworthy in handling worldly wealth and demonstrates how we do that in the earlier parable of the shrewd manager by advising us to follow his principle of using worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself.

His point is the manager used the wealth at his disposal to bring benefit to other people so they would speak our for and look after him. In other words Jesus isn’t arguing for distributive justice of the Marxist kind, he is arguing for a concept of wealth largely ignored today – the concept of stewardship. Wealth Jesus teaches is a trust from God to be used not for yourself but for the benefit of other people. If you want to invest in what counts with God and for eternity the only thing you can invest in is people, because people last but money doesn’t. Spanish Proverb. A shroud has not pockets.

So the story is a cautionary tale designed to demonstrate the peril of a life dedicated to acquisitiveness. The rich man had every opportunity to invest in eternity by using his material resources to benefit the poor man at his gate. Then would have been using his wealth as a wise steward to help others rather than for his own self indulgence. But failed to do so. You received your good things says Abraham but the poor man never benefited from them. So his condemnation not a verdict on way he became wealthy, or indeed that he was wealthy. Tragedy is that he was just wealthy and there was nothing more to write in his obituary.

Up to this point the audience would not have been too surprised by the story. The familiar story from Egypt had a similar kind of ironic reversal in the afterlife. But this closing part of the story is quite unique to Jesus. The ‘sting in the tale’ as so often in Jesus’ parables.

The five brothers are of course the Pharisees listening eagerly in his audience, just as they were the older brother in the earlier story of the lost son. And they are we who read the story today. The destiny of Lazarus and the rich man have been determined, but not that of the five brothers or we today. They and we still have our opportunity. The rich man would still like to send some ghostly emissary to warn us of the reality of the life to come. Like Dickens in A Christmas Carol, he is sure a suitable apparition will work a conversion on our Scrooge like hearts. Indeed in other versions of the story when someone asks to send a messenger back from the other side to warn others it is granted. But Abraham’s response is very different.

“They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”
“No father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead they will repent.”
He said “If they do not listen Moses and the prophets neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

This story teaches some sobering lessons about the dangers of using wealth selfishly, of neglecting to good to others when we can, of our ultimate destinies. But perhaps the last, the sting in the tale, is what turns someone’s heart from selfishness, greed, complacency and indifference to compassionate action. What leads to repentance and faith. A divine encounter with some celestial being. A miraculous event, signs and wonders.
No says Jesus it is the words of the Scriptures. All that Jesus is telling the Pharisees to do is to do what they already know, what Moses and the prophets have already said. Moses words in Deut (15. 7-8) about not being hard hearted or tight fisted toward the poor but being open handed and freely lending what they need, and Amos’ sustained warning of judgement on the rich who live in luxury and trample on the poor. And what about us, as well as Moses and the prophets, we have the teaching of Jesus himself, especially as given to us in this very gospel, Luke. There is much more in Jesus’ teaching on what we do with our wealth than there is on prayer or miracles or worship, the things we often think are the markers or real spirituality. Our service to others says much about our faithfulness to God.

Here is the word for us from this. The Bible is a very dangerous book. Every time we open it and read from it and hear the word of God in it, we are helping to determine our future by the way we respond to it. If we will not be changed by hearing the word of God then we will not be changed Jesus seems to be saying. And right through these Scriptures a theme from beginning to end is that the good things we have been blessed by in this world within the providence of God are not given for our own self indulgence, they are given that we enjoy them yes but above all by the enjoyment that comes from seeing the joy others also experience as they also share in their benefits. It is this that determines the spiritual calibre and direction of our lives.

Aug 10 was the feast day of Laurence, Deacon of the church in Rome. His ministry was to the poor and abandoned people of the streets of Rome. He administered the church treasury to feed and clothe and help the poor. During a period when the church was being persecuted he was ordered to round up the treasures of the church and turn them over to the government. Laurence returned before the court with all the poor and homeless people to whom he had ministered and proclaimed, “Here! These are the treasures of the church!”