**A reading from Luke’s Gospel, chapter 16 btra verse 19.**

**The Rich Man and Lazarus**

**19** “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. **20** At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores **21** and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

**22** “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. **23** In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. **24** So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

**25** “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. **26** And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

**27** “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, **28** for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

**29** “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

**30** “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

**31** “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

When I was reading this lesson, I was struck by the fact that it makes the same point as last week's Gospel lesson.  Last week, we read the Parable of the Dishonest Manager – the manager who was fired from his job but who landed on his feet by making friends with his boss's money before the boss got him out the door.

After telling that story Jesus told his disciples:

**I tell you, use worldly wealth**

**to gain friends for yourselves,**

 **so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.** (16:9).

In that story, Jesus was calling us to be like the dishonest manager––not in his dishonesty but in his concern for the future.  Jesus was calling us to care for the poor and vulnerable now so that we will receive God's blessings in eternity.

That was a tough scripture because it was so cryptic.  In telling that story, Jesus was inscrutable – hard to understand.

But if Jesus was hard to understand last week-–this week he is crystal clear.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is as easy as the Parable of the Dishonest Manager is hard.

Most children over the age of eight can understand the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.  It tells us that had better take care of the poor and the vulnerable in our midst, because our eternal fate depends on it.

I am reminded of the preacher who was called to a new church.  On his first Sunday, he preached a sermon urging the people to repent and change their ways.

On his second Sunday there, he preached the same sermon.

That seemed odd, but the congregation decided to wait to see what happened next.

On his third Sunday, the preacher preached the same sermon again.

This time the PCC convened a meeting and demanded an explanation.  **The preacher said, " I intend to preach that sermon until you repent and change your ways."**

**Bold Man!**

Jesus is telling two stories with the same point – the story of the dishonest manager, and the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

**Perhaps he is making sure that we get the point – and that we start doing something about it.**

 In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the RICH MAN is very wealthy.  He dresses in purple, a colour reserved for royalty.  He lives in a grand house with a fence and a gate to keep out the riffraff.  He feasts sumptuously every day.  He is about as rich as he can be.

LAZARUS is just the opposite.  He’s a poor beggar who lies at the rich man's gate.  He is sick.  His body is covered with sores.  He is so hungry that he longs for the scraps that fall from the rich man's table.  Nobody pays him any attention except stray dogs who come to lick his sores.

He is about as poor and miserable as he can be.

The poor man dies.  No surprise there!  No food.  No shelter.  No medical care.  Of course he dies.

The rich man dies too.  That's more surprising – but then we all die some-time.

Now comes the surprising part.

LAZARUS, the poor man, goes to heaven where Father Abraham takes great care of him.

The RICH MAN goes to hell, where he is miserable.

The rich man is able to see Abraham and Lazarus, so he pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water to cool his tongue.

He doesn't ask Lazarus **directly**.  He isn't used to pleading with people like Lazarus – poor people – dysfunctional people – failures.

All his life, the rich man has dealt with people at the top.

If he wanted something done, he talked to the boss – and it got done.

So the rich man asks **Abraham** to send Lazarus to help him.  He doesn't ask for much.  Just a drop of the water!

But Abraham tells him that it can't be done.

They are separated by a great chasm.

The rich man can't get to heaven, and Lazarus can't go to hell.

The rich man is condemned to his misery, and no one can help him.

The story makes it sounds as if the rich man accepted that right away, but perhaps it took him a while.  The rich man had to go through the Stages of Grief – denial, anger, and so forth – but, at some point, he finally comes to understand that he is stuck – nobody is going to help him.

At that point, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers so that they might not suffer the same fate.

Notice that the rich man still isn't talking to Lazarus.  Even in hell, he thinks like a rich man.

He insists on talking to Abraham – the man in charge.

Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers have Moses and the prophets.

The brothers have the scriptures, in which Moses and the prophets tell them to help the poor and the vulnerable.

If the brothers won't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they won't listen to Lazarus – even if Lazarus rises from the dead.

**Just like some people don't believe in Jesus – even after he rose from the dead.**

As clear as this story seems, there is one serious possibility that we will misunderstand it.

This story makes it sound as if poor people go to heaven because they are poor – and rich people go to hell because they are rich.  **That can’t be the case**.  Surely:

• The rich man didn't go to hell because he was rich.  He went to hell because he ignored Lazarus at his doorstep.

• The rich man went to hell because he ate enough for two people while Lazarus starved at his feet.

• The rich man went to hell for not caring – for not loving –for not lifting a finger to help a man in need.

The talk of heaven and hell might bother us.  We might not believe in heaven and hell.  I must admit that I do not know exactly what life after death will be like.

We are, however, painfully aware that Jesus spoke often and clearly to the effect that some people will prosper in eternity and others will not.

Perhaps the thing that should make us nervous is that Jesus so often speaks of a Great Reversal **– the first shall be last and the last shall be first**.

He tells us about people who do well for themselves in this life but who suffer through eternity.

That ought to make us sit up and take notice, because most of us are doing quite well **in this life**.

This is a powerful parable if we take it seriously.

We have probably heard of **Albert Schweitzer**.  As a young man, Schweitzer was a well-known concert organist in France and Germany – and a master organ-builder.  Then he became a famous author.  He was the toast of the town.

But at some point, this parable began to work on Schweitzer.  He began to see Africa as Lazarus - at the doorstep of a rich Europe.

He decided that he must do something to help, so he enrolled in a medical college so he could be a medical missionary.

People thought that he was crazy, but he did it anyway.

After becoming a physician, Schweitzer founded a hospital at Lambarene in the Congo, beginning in an old chicken coop.

He spent the rest of his life taking care of Lazarus.

Like Mother Teresa in our day, he became famous for his care of the poor and the vulnerable.

Finally, when he was 78 years old, he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

**I believe that the Nobel Prize pales by comparison with the rewards that God has for him in eternity.**

This week, I would like us to consider two questions.

Let’s think about them as we close this service.

Think about them during the week.

**They are important questions.**

Perhaps the answers to these questions may be very important for our future.

• The first question is this:

WHO IS THE LAZARUS AT MY DOORSTEP?

• The second question is:

WHAT AM I DOING TO HELP?

Let us pray:

I counted all my pennies while God counted crosses.

I counted gains while He counted losses.

I counted my worth by the things gained in store,

But He sized me up by the scars I bore.

I coveted honours and sought for degrees.

He wept as He counted the hours on my knees.

I never knew till one day by a grave

How vain are the things that we spend life to save.

I did not know till a friend went above

That **richest** is the one who is rich in God's love.

Amen