

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 25, 2022

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Alison J. Turner, *Associate for Children & Family Ministry and School Chaplain*

on

Luke 16:19-31, the rich man and Lazarus

+

If only...

Some of you will be familiar with a comedy-drama screened in the 1990's called *Sliding Doors*. Without giving away the ending, or indeed the plot, this is in brief, a film about the ordinary life, of an ordinary woman called Helen coming home from work, on an ordinary day. In the movie we observe her life unfold and the sequences of events that follow from a somewhat ordinary yet unbeknown to her, pivotal event in her life. Early on in the film Helen is running late, and moves hurriedly down rush-hour filled escalators and stairwells of the London Underground, only to arrive on the platform as the doors of an overcrowded train close. She is stopped in her tracks, misses her train, and consequently arrives home late.

Then something rather clever happens. These just-viewed scenes of the movie are rewound, and then a parallel story unfolds before our eyes for the remaining part of the show. In this second version of the storyline, the train doors are about to close, but this time Helen, makes it, catches the train, and we continue to watch an alternative pattern of life unfold. The effect of this production is poignant, as it clearly demonstrates how different life can be depending on the actions we take, and the choices we make. I find that it is very easy to watch a film and judge what would be the best course of action, or observe someone else's life assuming the role of an expert, in willing people to make choices, or make a move, that would lead to a better ending. 'If only' they had or had not done this, or that or the other, they wouldn't be in the fix they find themselves, and unfortunate outcomes could have been completely avoided. I'm sure we could think of many other books or films that prompt us to think this way, as indeed we might in regarding the familiar life, and death of a certain Rich Purple Robed character who we just encountered today in the Gospel according to Luke.

However, today's timeless parable serves us not simply as a story for us to observe or judge a character or characters from the outside but enter into a narrative in a way that sheds light on our soul. This parable in which we observe the path of two parallel lives. There is Lazarus, whose name aptly means God has helped, and who spends his life as one who is clearly gravely poor and deeply suffering. We are also introduced to a uncompassionate rich, purple robed man, who is blinkered to the needs of Lazarus and preoccupied by his own affairs. As the door closes on the unnamed, rich, purple robed man and he comes to the end of his life, he enters hades and looks back hoping perhaps to rewind the film the story of his life, which had turned out to be far from wonderful. *If only* he taken a different path, *if only* something or someone had prompted him, stopped him in his tracks, to open his eyes to an altogether different way of being, he would have faced an alternative ending within his very own narrative. I guess we all have had times where we can have experienced a wish to turn back time, to find a way to take back words or actions of hurt. Or encountered guilt-ridden feelings of if only. If only I had seen the doctor, if only I had checked my brakes, visited my uncle, and as with our rich, purple robed man, if only I had seen what was coming....

However, our rich, purple robed man's heartfelt plea for comfort, and for Father Abraham's favor, was not simply rooted in a wistful sigh but a deep-rooted wakeup call that stopped him in his tracks, but regrettably in a way that for him, that was far too late as his life on earth clearly impacted on his eternal destiny. All he had worked for, and devoured, the wealth he had acquired was worthless now, in the afterlife. He was desperate, and perhaps his pleading cry may well have come from a place of self-pity, rather than a long overdue sense of compassion for his neighbor, for Lazarus. We will never know his motive or words exactly, but we do know is that here in Hell, in Hades that he discovered first-hand the stark words that Paul gave to Timothy in our Epistle reading, and which are woven into our familiar funeral rites, *'For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.'*

Perhaps he could have, should have, been kinder, thoughtful, given something, to Lazarus, not a token coin, or one-off lavish gift simply to make himself feel better or serve as a means of bargaining, or a ticket to heaven. Rather he could have retuned his life from one of regret and 'If only' to 'I will', 'I will' to the Lord's kingdom values, 'on earth as it is in heaven.' A kingdom which as we heard only last week, that our Gospel writer Luke recognizes is biased to the poor, and in the words of Bishop David Sheppard, past Bishop of Liverpool, is committed to 'changing people from the inside out and changing the course of events to set people free.' Instead, our purple robed, rich man led a life that was biased to himself, not to the poor, and especially not to Lazarus who he passed day in day out, but did not see, let alone know by name.

If only he had seen things differently, for now the doors of eternity, like his closed eyes, hearts, mind, hand and voice, would never be to open again. There was too no room either to strike a guilt-ridden bargain or persuasive deal, even from a place of conversion and empathy for his brothers who were left behind. No chance of prizing open the door, no consolation for his loved ones remaining on earth, who like him we gather would also not be attuned to the words and warnings of Moses and the prophets, like those we heard from the prophet Amos just a short while ago.

Our main rich character brought all this on himself some might say, and therefore have a little empathy for him. If only he had seen things differently? and perhaps that sometimes goes for us as well? Don't we all get just a little preoccupied, greedy, selfish, and are blinkered to the needs around us, and when we do see them find them to be interruptions in our busy lives, at least some of the time? Do all our lives, just like our purple robed, rich man also seem at odds with our Lord's radical command to love, God our Neighbor and ourselves, at least some of the time?

Today's Gospel, today's good news, is therefore a little challenging, it may even stop us in our tracks, it may prompt us to take stock and to reflect on the choices and actions of our own lives, and indeed where we are heading. Perhaps for some it is time to start, or even to return to living as God would have us both do and be, 'on earth as it is in heaven.' It's not too late, you know?

And so, this coming week, may we with our eyes and ears, as well as our hearts and minds and hands and voices, be more open to the needs of people around us, including the people we simply don't notice or simply pass by day in day out, and don't even know by name. And in doing so may we live into the familiar question of our baptismal covenant, *'Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?'* not with regret, or a sense of indifference, but a whole hearted reply that proclaims, *'I will, with God's help.'*