

The picture is starkly drawn. The rich man is dressed in purple. The most expensive dye in the ancient world was purple dye. This man is seriously rich. And rich, you'll remember, in the Bible is usually synonymous with greedy. (A rich man, the old proverb runs, is either a thief or the son of a thief.) He eats sumptuously every day, not just on high days and holy days but every day. Here is a man with cholesterol in triple figures. He is a major coronary waiting to happen. Eventually it does.

At his gate lies Lazarus. The name means 'God helps'. Perhaps as people passed him they said, 'God help him'; no one else did. He too is covered in purple - but his purple comes from the bruises and sores that cover his body. From his place in the road he can see the banqueting hall and the daily feasting. The agony of his wasted, aching, empty stomach is compounded by the sight of the house dogs eating the bread the rich man and his guests throw to them having wiped their hands on it. The bread they discard would be a feast for him. Instead he is being eaten by the dogs who scavenge on anything. The storyteller is being delicate here. These are wild dogs not cuddly pets. They will be talking pieces out of him and he is too weak to drive them away. Perhaps; or maybe the dogs are being kind to him when human beings ignore him. One commentator points out that canine saliva has healing properties. He remembers his granny telling him when he scraped his knees to let the dog lick them. So perhaps the wild animals are in sympathy with poor Lazarus, emphasising the human contempt.

The rich man dies and is buried and it takes eight men to carry his coffin. Lazarus dies and...there is no mention of burial. Perhaps he rots where he lies; a bundle of bones in life and in death. Not to be buried was an appalling fate. But then we have the great reversal; a startling turn around. The accepted wisdom saw blessings in this life as a sign of God's favour and misfortune a sign of sin by the misfortunate himself or his parents. Not in Jesus' understanding. In Jesus' cosmic view the lowly and the hungry get to the top table and the well-fed and haughty get thrown out of the feast.

Lazarus is now in bliss. His wretched life is now compensated in his place at the topmost top-table. The rich man is in intolerable torment. How he wishes for a drop of the Evian that he used to have in his finger-bowl in times of old.

Still, the old habits die hard. He wants to send Lazarus to fetch a tonic water, pass on the ice and lemon. But Abraham corrects him. There is an unbridgeable gulf fixed between them. Another reversal. In the previous life there was a gate between them. A gate can be an entrance or a barrier. The rich man made it a

barrier; it was closed to Lazarus. Now the barrier between them is fixed and impassable, with the rich man on the wrong side.

Then there is a shift in the story. Suddenly we hear that the man has five brothers and he has concern for them. In a rush of sibling concern he wants them to avoid his own wretched, fiery fate.

The point is now Resurrection and so we can surmise that the rich man and his brothers are probably Sadducees, the group who counted among their number the rich high priestly families and the aristocracy, who have no belief in any form of resurrection and who accepted only the first five books of the Torah as the Word of God. Anything later, like the (oral) 'traditions of the fathers' which the Pharisees accepted was much too new fangle and modern for them. Jesus has a dispute with Sadducees about the Resurrection later in Luke's Gospel. On that occasion he will quote the passage from the Torah where Moses encounters God in the burning bush and the voice of God speaks of God as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"; but he is God of the living not the dead, "so all are in fact alive in Him".

Abraham in today's parable also points to Moses, that is the Torah, which Moses was said to have written. The final statement "They will not believe even if someone should rise from the dead", sounds like the lament of someone who knows the Lord is risen and yet is finding that he can't convince the intransigent to accept what he knows to be the case.

In other words, this final part of the parable looks as if it might have been added to a parable of Jesus by the early Church who were preaching "Jesus is risen" and finding some in their audience reluctant to accept this proposition.

Resurrection or damnation? What we do in this life, and what we fail to do, has consequences for all eternity.

The topic of Hell was a popular one for sermons in days of old; particularly in the Mission fortnights preached by Redemptorist preachers who would tell you the exact temperature of the flames and describe in eye-goggling detail the torments that would be endured there. These days the topic is scarcely mentioned, convinced as we all are of the overwhelming love of God for all his children. And yet, and yet...

The love of God has to be balanced both with the freedom he has willed to the creatures he lovingly made, and with the dreadful evil of which, in freedom, some of those creatures are capable. The twentieth century was perhaps the most blood-soaked in the history of humanity, and the twenty-first century has

taken up the gory mantle. Can the God who is both loving and just ignore the heinous crimes of the wicked?

But here we have to be careful. Not only must we avoid judging anyone before we have walked two miles in their moccasins, but we have to consider our own commissions and omissions. It is simplistic to see the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as a parallel with the first and third worlds, but the comparison cannot be ignored either. There are millions dying of malnutrition, AIDS, malaria and the violence of their fellow humans while we are wondering which breakfast cereal we should buy. We do somethings to help, your generosity to all good causes is terrific, but we don't raise the roof in protest and cry to heaven for vengeance against the oppressors. The rich man knew Lazarus' name; he could see him wasting away as Lazarus could see the man gorging himself, but the rich man did nothing except refill his plate and his glass.

Some say hell is full of other people. In fact hell is isolation. Those who have turned absolutely and irrevocably away from God are self-condemned to utter alone-ness. Is such a fate possible? We have to presume it is. Without condemning anyone else we have to imagine that hell can be our fate, if we do not open ourselves to responding to the needs of others at a cost to ourselves.

Aware that there are many millions like Lazarus in our world, on our doorstep, we have to share what we have with them in this life.