1 Timothy 6: 6-19; L uke 16: 19-end.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

This week’s texts all wrangle with the simple question: how are we to respond to the generosity of creation? Or, as one writer on theology and ecology asks: how is creation to be both ‘used’ and ‘enjoyed?’ As we celebrate Harvest at 9.45 this morning, and tomorrow with St Peter’s School, we stop to consider the effects of the inequality of wealth on the call we all share to care for the earth.

I watched Greta Thunberg earlier this week, haranguing the United Nations, and was saddened by the way she has been coached into such dramatic delivery of her beliefs, which weakened rather than strengthened her cause. But we cannot afford to lose sight of the urgency of that cause: that the good gifts brought forth by the Earth are at risk of failing and being inadequate for the needs of the world. Because we are failing that world.

The gospel for this week tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Now, what we mustn’t do is let this story become a scary one about hell and damnation.  It is emphatically not about the afterlife and its conditions.  It is, like others we have seen over the last several weeks, a parable; a made-up, entirely fictional story told to make a point; a point on how to live this life here and now.

The rich man ignores poor sore-infested Lazarus who has been tossed at the mansion gate.  Tossed is the accurate translation of the Greek word. Lazarus was discarded by person or persons unknown.

Finally, both men die.  Lazarus goes to be with Abraham, the founder of the faith, and is comforted with him.  The rich man, after being buried, is tormented with the flames of Hades.   Yet, the rich man, even in Hades, continues his sense of entitlement and social privilege by asking Father Abraham to have mercy on him and to ‘send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames’. Father Abraham’s answer is that the rich man might have thought harder about responding to Lazarus’ cries for help and mercy during their lifetimes.

Living in faith, then, has to mean living by the rule of Jesus, who frees us into contentment: happiness with enough. This gets us off the conveyor belt of pursuing wealth and possessions, and helps us to see that all creation is gift. Only by that, according to Timothy in today’s epistle, can the community be ‘rich in good works, generous, and ready to share…’

This is the only parable in which Jesus gives the key character a name. Lazarus.  So tradition has also given the rich man a name, Dives, which means rich man.  Having failed to summon Lazarus to cool his tongue, as he would so easily have been able to do in life, Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his five brothers of the consequences of the lifestyle he has lived, so that they do not end up with a similar torture for their sins.  But Abraham tells Dives that the brothers have Moses and the prophets to teach them how to live.  That should be enough.  Even if someone were to come back from the dead, they would not listen to that person; because they do not learn from the scriptures.

It’s all there. But we have to be open to seeing it and interpreting it for our own lives and times.

Jesus is highlighting the contrast between those whose hearts are governed by love of wealth and comfort, and those who are guided by love of others. At the centre of this parable is a rich man living a life of luxury. Expensive purple clothing. Purple was an expensive dye, so only the rich could wear stuff that had been dyed purple. Fine linen. Extravagant feasts. Don’t get me wrong - the Bible does not despise wealth in and of itself. Some of the greatest and most faithful Biblical characters (including Father Abraham himself…) were wealthy beyond belief.

The problem here is that the rich man is so wrapped up in his comfortable lifestyle that he doesn’t even notice the poor man, Lazarus, suffering at his own front gate. Even in the next life, when the rich man does finally see Lazarus, he views him not a fellow human whose suffering has ended, but as a lackey at his beck and call: Lazarus would now be able to serve him by bringing some water to soothe **his** suffering. While he, the man of means, clearly failed to provide anything to soothe Lazarus’ suffering while they were still in this life. …

There are a lot of characters in this story: Dives, Lazarus, dogs, angels, Abraham and the five brothers.  In the pattern of last week’s story: Where are we in this tale? Who are we?  Who do we relate to, and from whom can we learn?

On one level we are all of the characters by turns.  We might think we are not Dives because we are not rich.  But most of us are rich compared with the global picture.  I have no idea of how accurate it is, but one website I looked at suggested that a net income of just £22k would put you in the top one and a half percent of the world’s wealthiest. If we have more than one pair of shoes, more than one set of underwear, we are rich.  That is why the Mothers Union has been collecting used underwear. For those who don’t have even that.

If we have more than one meal a day, eating breakfast, lunch and dinner, we are the rich person in the story.  Most of us eat three meals. And snacks. And can afford takeout coffee on the way to church. Those who can’t do that could benefit immeasurably from the cost of that one item that we take for granted.

However, most poignantly perhaps, we are the five brothers (sisters).  Notice that we are not told by this parable whether or not the brothers ever get round to changing the way they live.  The story is open-ended, because it points always to us.

Parables are stories, but they are always always about real life.  Jesus told them specifically because they did relate to the lives of the people who were listening. Can we also consider the ways in which we could change for the better.

Had he been moved to compassion, and inspired to care for Lazarus, Dives would have begun to experience the presence of God right there on earth. The kingdom of heaven would have been present on earth as we know it can be; just waiting to be ushered in. It does not have to be an after-death thing.

People in general are not bad.  Most people are basically good and decent and caring.  But we all have some things we need to change.  We have the wherewithal to do that.  We have the scriptures, which should be sufficient for us even as they were not sufficient for the rich man.

But we can miss the sufficient, or ignore it and continue down the path of destruction not only of the world but of the stuff that makes up our humanity. Let us learn from this parable: appreciate our enough and share our much with those who have need of it, and be blessed.

**Amen**