**St Patrick’s Cathedral**

25 September 2016

Welcome again, everybody to our time of worship, prayer, reflection and Eucharist. An especially warm welcome to guests from overseas.

**Exordium**

As those of us who live on this island all know, faith in this country is under tremendous pressure. To give one symptom, somehow or other, the handing of the faith from generation to generation is simply not working. Culturally embedded practices do not amount to a personal commitment to the Gospel of Jesus. Nevertheless, within the relatively bleak overall scene, there are shoots of hope, little signs of growth, not quite a springtime of faith, but something like that. One of these shoots of new life is the quietly growing practice of praying with Scripture, often called *lectio divina*. There are different ways of “doing” lectio, but one common way is to start by noticing your feelings, your gut reaction, the spontaneous response triggered by a Bible passage or a Gospel story.

Take, for example, today’s Gospel reading of the rich man and Lazarus. It would be illuminating—and very helpful to the preacher!—if we could do a *vox pop* on how you, this morning, felt as you heard this parable proclaimed. A sketch of potential reactions could include: *tedium* (I’ve heard it before), *guilt* (what about the person begging I passed by during the week?), a *wake-up call* (a good reminder that material well being isn’t everything), *puzzlement* (how come they and see each other and talk, but cannot cross over?), a feeling of being *threatened* or *warned* (especially by the ironic/sarcastic bits), *intrigued* (by the brutal reversal of fortune) and so forth. *Joy* might not immediately spring to mind!

**Propositio**

The variety of potential reactions reminds us that there are layers or levels in the Gospel. If we read the parable again carefully, we can distinguish, I think, three levels: how Jesus expected his listeners to feel; how Luke expected his readers to feel; how the church expects us to take to heart today this important Gospel.

**Probationes**

1. Reading the parable plainly, at the level of Jesus, we have a fairly simple story of reversal and reward. The story illustrates another teaching of Jesus preserved by Luke in his four beatitudes and four woes.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. (Luke 6:20–21 NRSV)

These beatitudes are matched, in Luke’s Gospel, by corresponding the woes:

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. (Luke 6:24–25 NRSV)

In a Jewish setting, both the beatitudes and the woes are culturally baffling: material wellbeing was regarded as mark of God’s blessing. Within the wider Roman empire, there were indeed stories of reversal of fortune in the next life, tales of moral warning.

At that foundational level, the parable is never out of date. Who does not need reminding that possessions are not everything? In our better moments, we all know that wealth, even with all the flexibility it might bring, is not really a source of deep and lasting joy. At that level of a wake-up call, the parable speaks to us even today, tempted as we are to sleepwalk through life and imagine what having equals happiness.

2. In the reception of the parable in Luke’s Gospel, other possibilities are opened up. Luke has a mild weakness for disreputable characters—even through them the light shines. Our rich man, on the far side of the unbridgeable chasm, has enough fellow-feeling to be concerned about his five brothers—not bad at all for someone feeling the heat in hell. The subsequent dialogue is rich in irony, with an uneasy, even mordant edge:

Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (Luke 16:29–31 NRSV)

By the time Luke is writing, Jesus himself is risen from the dead. But even faith in the risen Lord is not sufficient unless the ground work in the Scriptures has been undertaken, “listening to Moses and the prophets.” Luke is inviting us to a larger picture. In the Old Testament, we find an immensely strong voice for social justice. For instance, we read in Amos, chapter 5, the remarkable words (perhaps not to be repeated here, where the music is so wonderful!):

Spare me the din of your chanting, let me hear none of your strumming on lyres, let justice flow like water, and uprightness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:23–24 NJB)

Luke is very aware of social inequality and highly sympathetic to the prophetic word about justice.

The second larger picture proposed by Luke is a very real hope in the resurrection of dead, grounded in Jesus’ own resurrection. Because of this conviction, our present life is not at all the full story. On the contrary, life is open to the transcendent now and in the afterlife.

The key throughout is relationship. In Luke’s view, social justice is really a matter of relationship: all in need are our bothers and sisters. Hope for life after death, even with the judgment entailed, is also a matter of relationship, this time with Jesus himself risen from the dead. In this way, Luke lifts an ordinary enough, though challenging, moral story into a wider and richer world of reference.

3. This matters for us today. There is a long-standing risk of reducing the Gospel to ethics or good behaviour. But, as a Cistercian monk once put it, “if you haven’t learned by the age of thirty-five that you should be better, forget it!” And the Gospel is not first of all good advice but the Good News. Again, relationship is at the centre. At the heart of the Gospel stands Jesus, his teaching and what happened for us in his death and resurrection. Because of the hope I have in Jesus, because the Bible offers a distinctive, alternative path of life, my attitude to the money, its accumulation and its use, is correspondingly entirely different.

**Peroratio**

Perhaps I could conclude with a story, this time taken from the desert fathers in the early Egyptian church. A young novice very much wanted to travel to see a famous hermit, known for his holiness and prayer. He found the master in his cave, standing on his head. I believe it is not easy to have a conversation when standing on your head, but nevertheless the hermit stayed like that until sunset. When conversation was eventually possible, the novice couldn’t help blurting out, “why do you do that?” “To remind myself,” said the hermit, “that we Christians view the world really upside down: to suffer is a joy, to be poor is to be happy, service replaces power, love rather than violence.”

This world of upside down Gospel values is not remote; on the contrary we encounter it every single day of our lives.