

## Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022 – Apprenticed to Jesus #4 ‘The Twist’ (Luke 16:19-31)

I wonder what you consider to be the biggest temptation in the Christian life? Oscar Wilde famously said: ‘I can resist everything except temptation,’ so I wonder what’s yours? Is it some moral challenge? Or maybe a tendency to doubt – either God or yourself? Perhaps it’s laziness or an incurable tendency to be distracted? Perhaps it’s overly high expectations of church, so you’re always disappointed with people?

Today I’m going to suggest that there’s one temptation that trumps all of those things. It’s one we don’t talk about much, but is responsible for so many of the ways that we wander from the path, and that is **the temptation to make Jesus in our own image, to make him the Messiah we want him to be**. So we invent a version of Jesus which fits all our preferences and prejudices: we spend a lot of time quoting the passages which we like and which back up our view, and try to avoid or ignore or reinterpret the passages which contradict us, or at the very least broaden our understanding.

In my job, I see this all the time. And I have to recognise the temptation in myself too – I can’t just pin it on everybody else: planks in eyes, and all that. But it’s there, and the only cure for it is humility, regular prayer for an open heart, *and* a willingness to read every bit of all of the gospels.

This Autumn I am using the standard readings set for these Sundays – but I nearly didn’t press ahead with this plan, because most of the passages are really challenging. But that is *exactly* the trap I’m talking about! It’s much easier to see Jesus as an amiable hippy, an all-you-need-is-love kind of guy, than the real Jesus, who made lots of enemies as well as friends, and also said some extremely tough and challenging things.

Take today’s passage – if you thought last week’s was hard, well, this ramps it up another notch! But let’s remember right at the start that it’s all Jesus, right in the middle of the same gospel which tells us that Jesus was born in a manger and later went to the cross for us: so it’s just as important to get to grips with as all the parables we like and all the miracles and all the people whose lives were changed.

And what you’ll find with this passage is one of two things: most people avoid it, especially people in the West, because the rich man sounds a lot more like most of us than the beggar at his gate; and, on the other hand, some people make so much of it that they make it mean something it doesn’t. Either way, it’s Jesus in our own image – and it stops us growing as followers.

So, as always, we’ll tackle it head-on today and I hope find inspiration even in the challenge! And the first thing we need to remember is the context: this is the same conversation Jesus has been having with the Pharisees since the start of chapter 15, which began with the Pharisees criticising Jesus for welcoming and spending time with unrespectable people. In reply, Jesus told them three stories of God’s unconditional welcome for all people, especially the lost; and then made it more personal, as we saw last week, by shining a light on their divided hearts.

The Pharisees’ big Achilles heel was their love of money. They had others, just like us, but it was their greed which corrupted them the most. They *claimed* to be wholly devoted to God but they didn’t walk the talk, at least when it came to their wallets. And Jesus is blunt: you can’t serve two masters; if God comes first, then money has to be put in its proper place, dedicated to God. We have to learn how to use money without serving or worshipping it.

And it is in *this* context that Jesus then tells the second of his two really challenging parables about money. Remember, he's still talking with the Pharisees and **calling them – and us – to walk the talk, to really live what we claim to believe.** So he sets up this scenario with two characters: one incredibly wealthy and one totally poor.

Now at this point we have to be clear what this parable is *not*. It is not trying to tell us exactly who goes to heaven and who does not. Yes, there are implications for our how we live on this earth which we'll come to in a moment: but what Jesus is not saying is that all rich people go to hell and all poor people go to heaven. One of the very important ways that we avoid making Jesus in our own image, making him fit what we want him to be, is to make sure that we remember all the other things that Jesus and the rest of Scripture says about something.

So if we look at all the other things Jesus says, as well as the apostles of Jesus who wrote the New Testament, we know that being rich or poor is not what sends you to heaven or hell. What you *can* say from this passage is that once you've arrived at your final destination, it doesn't change. But that is not the point of the parable.

**The point of the parable is about hypocrisy, not hell. It's about our hearts. What condemned the rich man was not his wealth, but his hard heart.** He sees the beggar every day, he must pass him as he leaves and when he returns, but he does nothing to help. He just spends all his money on himself, and leaves the beggar to starve. This is what sends him to Hades, because throughout scripture, God makes it clear that care for the destitute is close to his heart. As Abraham says to the rich man: Moses and the prophets have said it all already, why weren't you listening?

One of the popular views of the day was that divine favour and wealth go hand-in-hand – conversely, it was also thought that poverty and sin went together too. And we have to admit that sometimes that's true, sometimes people do make themselves poor by bad choices. However, and this is the crux of the parable, even if that is sometimes true (and it often isn't), there are two other truths which trump that: **first, since all human beings are made in the image of God, we don't judge people for their poverty, we are still called to bless and to care.** There but for the grace of God go any of us.

**Second, we are given wealth for a reason.** If you are rich, there is a reason for that: and it's not just because you're talented or you worked hard or made wise investments or you were just lucky. Yes, those things all played their part, and you can be thankful that you were blessed with health to work hard and wisdom to make good choices. But ultimately, there's an even more important reason that you're rich and that is because God is calling you to be generous. You have resources because God thinks you're the sort of person who can share them. If you spend them only on yourself, well, Jesus says, look at what happens to the rich man in the story. You get to live a fine old life now – but what about eternity?

It's very interesting that St Paul echoes Jesus later in the bible when he writes to his mentee Timothy, saying: 'Command those who are rich in this world to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share.' (1 Tim 6:17-18) This is what the rich man in our story didn't do – but is what we are called to do. **In the end, it all comes down to grace, to the undeserved generosity of God.** We've all received that, even though we didn't deserve it – and God calls us to pass it on: not just with our time and our talents, but also with our money and possessions. It is hard: but this same God is able to make all grace abound to us. May we all be inspired again today by God's lavish generosity towards us – and may God grant us all grace to pass it on. Amen.