

Justice in the end?

Luke 16:19-31

Intro

Where were you when the findings of the royal commission into the banking industry were released? While it couldn't really be classified as an 'historic moment' I guess. The ongoing findings, hearings, resignations from CEOs and board members, and final reports were a shameful indictment of malpractice, negligence, deception, arrogance, and rapaciousness in the finance sector – particularly the big 4 banks – CBA, NAB, ANZ & Westpac. The hub and glue of much of Australia's economic success, was revealed to have a dark seedy underbelly that actively exploited vulnerable Australians, and regularly put profits before people. And in some cases in the most grotesque and soul-crushing ways.

Adele Ferguson, the journalist that broke the story which set the royal commission chain in motion, wrote this in her book 'Banking Bad':

"The royal commission exposed rampant greed, systemic gouging of the living and the dead, bribery and corruption in mortgage lending, billions of dollars milked from retirement savings, dud life insurance policies, and financial advisors gorging on fat commissions at the expense of their customers."

"Over the previous four decades, since the deregulation of the financial sector, it had been a free-for-all for bankers. Investors, addicted to high shareholder returns, played their part in a rotten system where banks and financial services companies got rich on the savings of the Australian people."

"It was only when reputational damage tore through these institutions, and share prices fell, that investors started to care about ethics and reputation."

There's a way of seeing the world, and seeing your fellow man which excuses and rationalises, and justifies all sorts of horrible destructive behaviour.

On one occasion a lower level executive raised an issue of deceptive practice with one of the Big 4 bank CEOs, who was reported to have said 'Temper your sense of justice' in response.

'Temper your sense of justice'.

Isn't that shocking? There's a way of seeing the world that is blind to the pain your sin can cause others. If you want to make it big, all you gotta do is shrink your conscience, your heart and your soul.

Temper your sense of justice, empathy, compassion, fairness, mercy and humanity.

It seems to be what set apart the ultra rich from the masses. Especially the poor, vulnerable and suffering. It's a stark contrast between those that have not, and those that have far too much.

The Bible too is full of stark contrasts, which are particularly evident in many of Jesus' parables. And today we'll look at one of the parables which contrasts temporal injustice with eternal judgement.

In Luke 16 we're introduced to 3 characters – The Rich man, Lazarus, and Abraham. And we'll look at them now. Let's start with the Rich man.

1) The Rich man

- As with most of the parables, the stories are short and direct.
- And yet they're striking. We can learn a lot about the characters from very little in way of narrative and plot development.
- And there are three things we learn about the rich man. The first being that he:

1.1. ***Enjoyed his good things on Earth***

- It says in v19 that he lived in extravagant luxury every day – not just weekends.
- Dressed in fine, expensive, glamorous, designer Purple linen
- Presumably lived in a large estate, hence having a gate to keep people out.
- Lazarus hopes to get food that falls from his table in verse 21.
- The rich man is wealthy, and represents not just abundance, but excess.
- Everyday luxury. No need to work, just be pampered, served and indulged.
- He can secure whatever he wants
- But unbeknownst to him he's also securing his own eternal damnation
- When it comes his time to die, he sees Abraham with Lazarus and calls out asking for some reprieve in v24.
- 'Father Abraham have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'
- But Abraham responds 'remember that in your life time *you received your good things*'
- Abraham offers a reality check to the Rich man.
- He is in agony because he *chose* to be there unwittingly.
- He personally chose *his good things* during his lifetime.
- And was too arrogant, oblivious and self-absorbed to consider the things of God.
- And his own eternal state before God.
- So that's the first thing, but we also see that

1.2 ***His character does not change***

- It's interesting that he knows Lazarus' name in v24.
- Clearly he *could* see Lazarus at the gate all along, and actively *chose* not to help him.
- And even still when their roles are reversed he can't help but see Lazarus as his servant.
- Whether that's Lazarus bringing him personal comfort, or warning the people he cares about in verses 27-28.
- There's no apology, no acknowledgement, he doesn't even address Lazarus directly,

- The rich man does not realise that earth's values, rules and hierarchies no longer apply and he expects Abraham to order Lazarus to do his bidding.
- So there's an indifference to Lazarus' humanity, his story, his suffering on earth. He instead shows contempt.
- Contempt for the weak, contempt for the poor, contempt for the needy.
- He tempered his own sense of justice, and now he can't even see it when it's enacted properly back on him.
- So his character does not change.
- And the third thing we see is that

1.3 He still does not repent

- Despite being in torment (23)
- He plays the victim, as if he has been cheated
- In verses 27-30 indicates if he had known he might have acted differently, so if he could at least warn his brothers then they might be spared perhaps.
- It sounds noble, he begs, he wants to warn them. But there's still no acknowledgement of wrong doing, or personal responsibility.
- And the thing that's most revealing of all is that he completely misses the point about why he's there in the first place.
- In verse 29 Abraham says that Moses and the Prophets are sufficient warning.
- But the rich man knows better apparently.
- He says 'No, Father Abraham'.
- Rather than repenting, he tries to tell Abraham – God's representative – what's what.
- Clearly he's learnt nothing, he is not sorry or remorseful and his condemnation is deserved.
- And that brings us to Lazarus and Abraham.

2) The voice for Lazarus (Abraham)

- I mentioned before that it's interesting that the Rich man knows Lazarus' name
- What even more interesting is that Lazarus has name in the parable at all.
- Lazarus appears to be the only character in any of Jesus' parables that actually has their name listed.
- It means 'God has helped'.
- And where man does not help God steps in.
- Not only does Jesus give him a name in the story,
- But he also gives a voice.
- Lazarus doesn't himself speak, but Abraham – a revered Old Testament figure who received the God's promised blessing for the nation of Israel - so a Forefather and representative of God, speaks and advocates for him.
- Lazarus.
- And this is something that God does frequently in scripture.

2.1 The Bible often gives voice to the poor

- While rarely do we hear the poor and afflicted speak in the Bible, so often God speaks for them.
- He gives them their voice, and he is their advocate.
- And there is something powerful about having a voice.
- This week we had our first ever Tasmanian recipient of the Australian of the year award
- Grace Tame – check out her acceptance speak if you haven't seen it yet.
- For those that don't know she was an ongoing victim of sexual assault by a teacher during high school, and due to Tasmanian gag laws she was unable to speak out against her abuser and ensure justice could be delivered.
- She wasn't able to share her experiences in any sort of meaningful way, and no one could really know what she had gone through.
- But she had a powerful advocate. Another male teacher who believed her and helped share her story.
- She was able to go through the courts and the gag laws have now been defeated.
- Having her voice heard was an indispensable prerequisite to justice.
- And this is something the Bible does too.
- The bible gives voice to the poor, the needy, the oppressed and the downtrodden.
- And God not only gives a voice, but gives dignity and hope to those that are powerless and muted.
- And there will be comfort too.

2.2 *Humiliated now, but comforted in heaven*

- In his earthly time he lived at the gates of the rich man, longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. He was in need of food, shelter and medical care.
- But it never came. He was ignored, forgotten, deprived of relief.
- He did not choose his material conditions, but like so many a victim of circumstance.
- And I think it's a further indictment on the rich man that Lazarus' only comfort came from stray dogs who licked his wounds.
- Abraham says of Lazarus that he received 'bad things' not *his* bad things
- He doesn't have the same agency or control as the Rich man.
- He was denied choice, assistance and dignity.
- But not so with God. Abraham affirms that Lazarus is indeed now in comfort (v25).
- Not by virtue of being poor, but as a faithful servant
- Someone who heeded the warnings, and knew his reality before God.
- He now sits at the table of Abraham, feasting in heaven
- Free from his oppressors and cherished in God's Kingdom.
- And nothing can change that, certainly not the Rich man.
- A fixed and permanent chasm separates them now, and the tables have turned.

3) The chasm

3.1 *Fixed and permanent*

- The Rich man sees Abraham & Lazarus far away in verse 23

- And in verse 26 Abraham makes clear that this chasm has been 'set in place'.
- Intentional. Made that way by God so no one can cross over.
- Much of the picture here is largely allegorical and yet incredibly vivid. We're meant to visualise this conversation and see the contrast between Lazarus in comfort and the Rich man calling out in condemnation and agony.
- The roles have been reversed.
- The Bible's picture language frames hell in terms of fire, darkness and suffering but we cannot know for sure of whether it's depicting physical realities, or using powerful and evocative imagery to send a frightening warning of a spiritual reality. It could be somewhere in between. Who knows
- What we do know though is that this is a place that the Bible regularly and emphatically warns against.
- And that this chasm between heaven and hell is fixed and permanent.
- What we do in this life now, matters for all of eternity.
- And the way we see life and understand God now, matters for all eternity. Even...

3.2 *Divine acts not enough to persuade hard hearts*

- 'Moses and the Prophets' is the phrase Abraham uses to talk about scripture. Particularly the Old Testament. Add to that the New Testament and we have all the warning we could ever need.
- And let's be real. Basically everyone knows the Bible talks about the idea of Hell.
- If people will not listen to that, nor will they listen to supernatural acts.
- 'Even if someone rises from the dead' in verse 31.
- God is not a performing monkey who needs to prove himself to anyone
- Just as Lazarus is hiding in plain sight, in which the rich man cannot see what's at his own front gates. So it is with God.
- And yet he sends that exact same divine example anyway.
- God literally brings someone back from the dead to affirm God's power, to warn of coming judgement, to preach the good news, to give voice to the poor, and to forgive us our sins.
- And we might not have large gates on our properties like the rich man, but
- Jesus knocks at the door for each and every one of us.
- We cannot feign ignorance, or expect that our successes and lofty positions of authority in this world will carry over to the next.
- Judgement is the great equaliser, and just like the royal commission – our misdeeds will be exposed, brought to light, and it will be us on the chopping block.
- Everyone will be judged for their life on earth
- Every hidden thing will be uncovered.
- But there's a second great equaliser
- Everyone has the opportunity to take refuge in the cross.
- To be shielded from judgement, and brought into the banquet of God.
- To heed the warnings, to acknowledge our human selfishness, weakness and greed.
- To repent and turn away from directing the object of our loving selfishly on ourselves, our ambitions and our pleasures, and instead to God and our neighbours.
- We all have the opportunity to follow Jesus, honour his words, and carry our cross.

- I want to close by sharing a story about one of the most moving pieces of music I've ever heard.
- It's by the minimalist composer Gavin Bryars and it's called Jesus' blood never failed me yet.
- It was made when he was helping a friend film a documentary about some of the poorest suburbs in London and they came across some drunken homeless people who were rowdily singing all sorts of songs, but there was one guy who wasn't drunk, and was quietly singing a hymn to himself – he was a Christian.
- Jesus' blood never failed me yet, never failed me yet
- Jesus' blood never failed me yet
- There's one thing I know, for he loves me so
- They caught some of it on the camera and Gavin Bryars went home and realised he could create some sort of piece with it, and before long it became a project for him
- So he took it to his studio to start composing, and at one stage went to grab a coffee not realising he had left the loop on, and when he returned there he found what was normally a lively and boisterous room, completely subdued with people quietly sobbing and listening along to this homeless' man's song.
- He finished composing the score behind it and later released it in 1975 on his sombre album 'The sinking of the Titanic'
- I highly recommend listening to it if you can find it. There's a Tom Waits crooned version too.
- Anyway It's incredibly powerful stuff
- And it's powerful because of what that songs means to that homeless man.
- A guy that has been forgotten by society and left for dead. Still full of hope, knowing that God hasn't let him down because of Jesus' life giving sacrifice on the cross.
- This guy knows that he'll join the banquet in heaven, and have a room especially prepared for him just as Jesus promises.
- Jesus blood will never fail him, and it won't fail you either.
- So let's listen to Moses, and the Prophets. And the gospel itself.
- Let's heed the warning of the man risen from the dead
- And not be caught out enjoying our good things now, when eternity awaits.
- Let's pray