

(Jer 32.1-3, 6-15; Ps 91.1-6, 14-end; 1 Tim 6.6-19; Luke 16.19-end)

‘Bridging the chasm’

‘Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed’, says Abraham to the rich man in his torment.

‘Chasm’ is a powerful and dramatic word, isn’t it? It is the sort of word that evokes a certain *frisson* as we say or hear it. I don’t know about you, but when I hear the word ‘chasm’, in my mind’s eye I inescapably see myself on the edge of a sheer drop, looking across to land on the other side, but with a fear-inducing and paralysing distance between here and there.

As with all of the parables that Jesus told, there is a lot going on here. In our attempts to explore his meaning, there are many strands that we could try to follow. We might look at the relationship between what Jesus says here in this parable about Lazarus and the rich man and what Jesus says about the poor and the hungry and the rich and the well-fed in Luke’s version of the beatitudes, the blessings and woes that we find in chapter 6. Or we might look at this as another example of the classic Lukan theme of reversal and upset, with the humble being lifted up and the proud being brought low, the first being last and the last first. Or we might focus on the narrative device of irony used here by the writer. Unlike the Pharisees hearing the parable from Jesus’ lips that first time, the subsequent Christian reader of the Gospel already knows about Christ’s resurrection. Jesus’ concluding words to the Pharisees, put into the mouth of Abraham, ‘if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’ take on a depth of irony and pathos that should stop us in our tracks.

Perhaps most obviously of all, we might understand this parable as telling us something about qualifying for eternal salvation. Lazarus enters the blessed afterlife and the unnamed rich man does not. That is, as I believe you might express it here: ‘kindova big deal’. In the 2,000 years or so that we have been trying to understand Jesus’ teachings and live according to his example, as a Church, we have been, shall we say, quite preoccupied with questions of heaven and hell and who gets to go where for eternity. It matters to us. We think about it. We formulate doctrine about it. We argue about it and we fall out about it.

I don’t want to fall out with any of you about questions of eternal salvation, predestination, salvation by works or by faith, universal salvation or any such contentious thing. That’s not a good thing for a visiting preacher to do. And anyway, as I read it and receive it, this is not a definitive statement by Jesus about who gets to go to heaven and who does not, nor is it about what heaven or hell will be like. It is a story he told to some Pharisees who were complaining

about his teaching, reacting against it, ridiculing him, and, in a few short chapters' time, conspiring to have him executed. It is a parable about obduracy. It is a warning against being unwilling to accept what Jesus says about the things of God, a warning against being unwilling to change our minds, unwilling to believe in a new thing.

But we do, I think, need to pause and reflect on the central image of the great chasm. We can't gloss over that too easily, just because it is, as it seems to me, so very uncomfortable.

In a metaphorical sense if not, happily, in a geological sense, we are surrounded by chasms in our daily lives today. If we were in England, I might give the example of the chasm in a single city between the two rival clans of supporters of football clubs (sorry, I should say, soccer clubs) in that city. In the city of Liverpool, that would be the great rivals Liverpool (the reds) and Everton (the blues); in the city of Manchester, it would be the two clubs Manchester United (again red) and Manchester City (again blue). There is a chasm between the reds and the blues. Here, in the USA, I believe there is a chasm between reds and blues also, though based on a different type of affiliation and difference. Within the Church, we have Protestant and catholic; in wider society we have Pro-life and Pro-choice; Liberal and Conservative; citizen and immigrant; even Flying Squirrels or Tides.

We do it the whole time: we divide ourselves into distinct groups and look at each other across the chasm. Why do we do this? I am not a sociologist, but I suspect that this has something to do with our sense of self and our sense of security. We feel better about ourselves (it is horrible to say this, but I believe it is true) when we differentiate ourselves from others. By putting people into a box that is, in some way, 'not like us', we feel more confident in our own identity – as part of a group of 'people like us'. Sadly, this is often not an entirely value-neutral process: we not only identify and delineate difference, but we like to think of our group, the 'in group,' as not just different from, but better than the others, the 'out group'. Reds and Blues again. Or, as the pious Pharisee says in Luke Ch 18, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers or even like this tax collector'. There are myriad and complex ways in which we might seek to make these groupings, based on all sorts of criteria, but the principle is the same. Our identity is stronger as part of a group and our group identity is more secure if it contrasts with other groups. It was not only in death but also during his lifetime that the rich man and Lazarus were separated. They inhabited different worlds, across a chasm.

The particular agony of this parable that Jesus told is that Abraham described the chasm as one that cannot be crossed. Lazarus could not help the rich man and the rich man could not cross to be in Abraham's bosom.

Yet our faith is fundamentally and precisely about crossing the chasm, is it not? The whole purpose and meaning of the Cross, as I understand it, is that it is a bridge that crosses a divide, an existential divide. The Cross spans, bridges, connects heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, life and death. It is a bridge that brings hope to places of despair, light to places of darkness. The incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus offer hope because Christ's descent

into our humanity lifts us into his divinity. That is some bridge. Big enough and strong enough to cross any chasm.

The point of the parable is not that the rich man is eternally damned. The point is that he was, and it seems remained, so obdurate that he would not see and use the bridge that is offered to him by our loving God. As Abraham told him in the story, there is Scripture (the law and the prophets). And, as Luke has Jesus have Abraham say, there is one who was raised from the dead. Here we come to the core of the parable, I believe: Christ, the one raised from the dead, is our bridge; he is a bridge out of any difficulty, across any chasm we might encounter.

So, where might we go with all this? Assuming that you recognise the picture I have tried to paint about chasms, how do we take and apply the idea of Christ being for us a bridge?

Perhaps in two ways.

The first way is by being bridge-builders. As I'm sure you know, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters give the title 'Pontiff' to the Pope, the Bishop of Rome. Pontiff derives from the Latin *Pontifex*, which in turn very probably derives from the words for bridge (*pons*) and to make (*facere*), so the pope, the Pontiff, is the chief bridge-builder. But building bridges is not a ministry reserved to the Pope or to any other individual. It is the work of the whole of the people of God. We are to be bridge-builders in our communities. Where there are chasms, where there is polarisation, separation, hostility across divides, our ministry of reconciliation and redemption is lived out by making connections, building links, crossing and eradicating social boundaries. This work, the work of practical social justice, is not done in the interests of some sort of social engineering, nor is it done to seek to deny or diminish our God-given diversity, it is to rediscover and celebrate our common humanity as children of the one God.

The second way is by allowing Christ to be our own bridge to God, to reconcile us with our creator, the one who knows us more fully and more intimately than we can imagine, the one who, as Augustine said, is closer to us ('more inward to us') than we are to ourselves.

Although these two ways of interpreting and applying the idea of a bridge may seem to be different, or at least to have a difference of orientation (us-towards-others on the one hand and us-towards-God on the other), in fact I believe they are aspects of the same thing. It is only by allowing Jesus to be our bridge to God, by surrendering ourselves to Christ in the deepest and fullest sense, that we receive from God the needful gifts of grace to enable us to be part of a bridge for others. Works of social justice are fuelled not by our own merits or in our own strength, but by God's grace and mercy.

As, week by week, we meet and celebrate the Eucharist together and receive Christ in the sacrament of bread broken and wine outpoured, so we take him into our selves and are taken by him into the depths of God. As Jesus prayed and promised before his passion, 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17.21).

That's what I want to be about as a follower of Jesus Christ. Not resting complacently in Abraham's bosom and gazing smugly across at the poverty and torment of those on the other

side of the chasm, but rather working out how to receive Christ into myself so that I, with you and with all the saints, may become part of a bridge to unite all God's people within God's eternal embrace.

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