

A Disciple of Jesus

This week the famous Christian named Brother Andrew passed into God's glory. Brother Andrew, was the founder of Open Doors, a Christian charity helping the persecuted church round the world.

He was nicknamed 'God's smuggler', he studied theology in Scotland, I would imagine the BTI and his ministry started by smuggling Bibles across the Iron Curtain in a blue Volkswagen Beetle. It was the beginning of Open Doors which, more than 65 years later, is continuing his ministry of supporting persecuted Christians. His story has inspired millions of people around the world to speak out on behalf of the voiceless and suffering.

In an interview recently he was asked what would he want put on his grave stone, after a bit of thought he said that he would simply want his name, and below it, "He was a disciple of Jesus". He said that that says it all.

Aren't Jesus's parables bang up to date?

A certain rich man dressed in purple and lived in luxury everyday. Immediately we have an image in our mind that paints a picture of the elite. The untouchables in the sense that they are living in a bubble – a world that they have made and everybody outside of their bubble is invisible, even those sitting at the entrance to his front gate.

Well, that's the picture Jesus paints.

In his next breath he paints another picture, this time one of poverty. One can imagine the poor in Bangladesh, sitting at the side of the road with their hands held high, expecting something to drop into them.

This would be like the man Jesus describes. He was a beggar, of the lowest caste, his only companions were the wild dogs who licked his wound; no-one else to care for him; no-one to look after him. He is at the bottom of the pile, the least of the least. The chasm could not be wider. They are poles apart, unimaginable wealth and excruciating poverty, and Jesus sublimely paints this incredible picture of the chasm and divide that exists, not just 2000 years ago but in our world, between the haves and the have-nots.

I would rather not preach on this passage, because I see myself in the picture, and I see myself in relative terms as the rich man. When I scan the world and see folks living in refugee camps and living in slums, I am rich.

Tradition has given the rich man a name and his name is *Dives* which is simply Hebrew for 'rich man'.

I read that the first part of the parable comes from ancient Egypt, who knows from the Jewish people when they lived there, but if that is the case, what Jesus does is he widens the picture and he brings in an eternal dimension to the parable.

He asks the question, *“What will happen to this rich man and what will happen to the beggar called Lazarus when God calls them to account for their lives?”*

The next step of the parable Jesus invites into another picture, and this time it is when the beggar Lazarus dies, he is released from his suffering, for the issue wasn't just poverty, it would have been loneliness, rejection, pain, abuse, and almost certainly illness and he is graciously carried by angels to heaven, and there in heaven he finds himself at Abraham's side.

This is an amazing picture; we have witnessed great scenes around the Queen's funeral service. King Charles himself said on several occasions ‘May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest’ – words taken from Shakespeare, but no doubt finds their locus in such great passages that we are considering this morning.

Aren't those wonderful comforting words, that our loved ones are carried by angels to be at the side of Abraham? *May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.*

Why Abraham?

Well, Abraham was known in Scripture as the Friend of God. To the Jew, Abraham was the father of faith and the faithful. A man who was prepared to give up everything for God, even his own son. Abraham heard the word and left everything to follow God. Now, this poor beggar finds his comfort in the presence of the one who was considered the greatest man of faith in Israel.

What would it be like to receive comfort from Abraham? For us, as Christians, I'm sure that we would be looking not just for Abraham but for the comfort of Jesus! What would that feel like - to know his loving embrace, to know the warmth of his smile and the reassurance of his words?

But the story becomes somewhat uncomfortable when Jesus flashes another picture onto our screens and this time it is of Dives, the rich man, who has also died and was buried. There is no talk of angles carrying him. His earthly life has ended but he reappears in a place called hell.

Now, I'm not a hell and brimstone preacher, but Jesus introduces this into this parable, so it is worth noting!

What do we notice about the rich man? Well roles have been reversed. He lived in luxury, now he is in torment. He has plenty of time to reflect on his life, and perhaps it is this that torments him the most. If only I had noticed that beggar!

But he can also see Abraham, and here we have another scene, but Abraham is in the distance, a long way off, but he is able to communicate with Abraham and Jesus paints this incredible scene of the tormented Dives, the rich man having a conversation with Abraham.

Is he asking for forgiveness? Is he repentant? Is he sorry for the way he lived his life on earth?

No, not at all.

He is still demanding attention for himself.

He is calling for the beggar Lazarus to come and cool his tongue with cold water. I think that what Jesus is drawing our attention to is that there is no change in the rich man's heart. His heart is still the same, even in eternity. His thoughts are only with himself, and he sees Lazarus still as a servant to come and bring him relief.

Abraham's response is direct and challenging, when he tells Dives, that he has had all the good things on earth, and poor suffering Lazarus was at the bottom of the heap, and he had nothing, but now things are reversed, Lazarus has become the one who is empowered through the love and care of Abraham and who will experience the riches of God's grace and the rich man takes Lazarus's place of suffering.

And he also informs the rich man that this is a permanent arrangement. There is a great chasm and there is no crossing over.

It is a dramatic picture; it is a challenging scene, and what does it teach us?

Like the Christmas Carol, it is a chilling story, which invites us to look at our ethical actions and to look into our heart, and question our motives and our to see how we help those in need.

The easiest thing for me to do today is to point the finger at others. To point the finger at the wealthy elite that we have in our world today, those who get huge bonuses, those who are living in exorbitant luxury, with castles and cars and private yachts and jets. Yes, they will be answerable to God in how they shared their wealth.

But this parable is not just for them, it's for me and, dare I say it, for you and for us all. It invites us to look deep into our hearts and to ask the question, *do I*

love God with all my heart, soul and mind and do I love my neighbour as I love myself? Only those two questions are important for eternity and the answer will be a resounding *No!*

It has to be for there is no-one who loves God with all their heart, soul and mind and there is no-one who is totally committed to their neighbour, but that's where the Cross comes into to play in this parable.

For God knows that we are unable to be perfect in all that we do, and so Jesus comes into the world to take our sin, and to make our peace with God. But he also asks us to take our crosses and follow after him and to do as he would do. He invites us to be a disciple of Jesus.

So, today in our reading we are challenged by this incredible parable but we shouldn't be frightened because God calls us into relationship with him, and he knows our heart, and when we follow Jesus, we are walking in God's ways, and he calls us to confess our sin, and to seek his help in doing his work.

So that our attitude to the poor and needy is a matter for our conscience and when Christ is in our lives, he will direct us as to what we should do. We can't help every beggar on the street but we can have a heart for them and give what we have.

It is interesting to contrast Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan and this parable Lazarus.

Both are about the question of eternal life - The Good Samaritan passed the victim and stopped and helped and this was commended and this is the way to eternal life said Jesus. But the rich man passed the beggar each and every day and this was condemned and this was the way to hell.

It's a sobering parable but I believe if we are a disciple of Jesus, we have nothing to fear as he will lead us in the right paths and paths that lead to everlasting life.

Brother Andrew has inspired me this week, as has this parable, and what a way to be remembered when our time on earth has gone, he or she was a disciple of Jesus Christ,

Amen.