

“Being set free” a sermon based on Luke 16: 19 – 31, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 25 September 2016 by Kerry Enright.

Few stories describe our global predicament better than the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

How trapped we seem to be in an unequal world, in a world of rich and poor. And trapped in behaving unequally.

The trapped-ness is evident in the story. The poor man goes to be with Abraham. The rich man goes to Hades, to hell. And there in Hades, listen how he speaks to Abraham!

“Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”

The rich man is so used to entitlement, so used to exercising influence, so used to getting his way, that even in Hades he is still ordering people around, still expecting people to act as he directs, still putting himself at the centre.

Even Father Abraham, who is father of all nations, the protector of all people – even he is expected to dance according to this man’s tune.

The rich man sounds not one note of contrition or admission of wrong or confession of guilt or sense of solidarity with Lazarus.

Even in hell, he has no sense that there was something wrong in the chasm between the rich and the poor, between Lazarus and him.

This is how it is meant to be, that those who are entitled are entitled and those who are poor are poor. So be it!

And it is evident that he has been told, before, that this was not how it was meant to be. He and his brothers have been sent Moses and the prophets, and he did not listen to them. Once we die, the chasm is fixed. Now is the time to respond. Now is the time to act.

Last week the Labour Party celebrated its centennial.

Among others, it remembered three people who had worked together in Kurow.

During the worst years of the Great Depression in the 1930s, 350 unemployed men and their families had set up the Willows Camp in the hope of working on the Waitaki Dam.

They lived in tents and shacks made out of willow branches and beaten out of fuel cans.

And in Kurow there were people referred to as three wise men.

Girvan McMillan was the doctor, Andrew Davidson the headmaster and Arnold Nordmeyer the Presbyterian minister.

They were concerned for Lazarus, the families in the Willow Camp. Not just the chasm, but what created the chasm.

They developed six principles that became the basis of a national health system, that informed our social welfare system.

Nordmeyer and McMillan became members of parliament.

These three saw Lazarus at their gate.

Here in Dunedin, there used to be St Andrew's Church in the middle of a disreputable triangle formed by Princes, Maclaggan and Maitland Streets.

In the late 1800s, people drawn by the gold rushes had set up a tent city there.

It grew into a sprawling multi-ethnic, multi-lingual mix of cheap housing, dark alleys and smoky factories with dozens of bars, and brothels and gambling and opium dens.

In 1879 Rutherford Waddell came to be the minister of St Andrew's. In no time, the Church was engaged with the community around it.

Even though it had some of the wealthiest people in the city as members, people who came down the hill from Mornington, it seems that St Andrew's was determined to serve the least wealthy, the least privileged, the least entitled.

By 1890 Waddell had set up a savings bank, a free library and New Zealand's first free kindergarten.

Waddell became most known for his famous sermon "The Sin of Cheapness", and the actions that followed.

The sermon highlighted the grinding poverty in Dunedin. The cause of the poverty, said Waddell, was a lust for cheap goods and so wages were pushed lower and lower.

Everyone, said Waddell, everyone needed to fight against this evil.

Not only does this division continue, now we have outsourced it overseas.

I have been to factories that produce our clothes, especially in Manila, with appalling conditions.

St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, with Rutherford Waddell, saw Lazarus and was determined to bridge the chasm.

This is our heritage. This is the gospel. This is Jesus.

But how easy to give up.

In the midst of economic systems and the self-satisfaction of the successors to the rich man in Hades, how easy to give up.

The passage of Jeremiah is one of hope.

Jerusalem was a war zone: "The army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem." Think of the horrors in today's Aleppo.

The Babylonians had breached the city walls, then "burned down every important building" — the royal palace, government offices, and the sacred temple that had served as the centre of Israel's religious life for 410 years.

They executed government officials. Soldiers plundered Jerusalem's national treasures, and everything of any value, both sacred and secular — "pots, shovels, wick trimmers, ladles, censers, and sprinkling bowls."

Dead bodies littered the streets. Children begged for bread. There was cannibalism. The intellectual elite, the skilled workers, and artisans were deported to Babylon. The poor "who owned nothing" were left to fend for themselves amidst disease and famine.

The puppet king Zedekiah consulted Jeremiah: "Is there any word from the Lord?"

Yes, said Jeremiah, surrender to Babylon. Give up. Don't fool yourself. Don't listen to the "reckless lies" and "false dreams" of your sycophants. This is the end of the end. Accept defeat.

Later, Jeremiah wrote a famous letter to the exiles in Babylon, "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Seek the welfare of your pagan conqueror! Pray for God's blessing on Babylon! Embrace your exile, for there will be no miraculous exodus.

Zedekiah didn't listen to such a defeatist and unpatriotic message. Instead, he arrested Jeremiah and threw him down a muddy cistern. He was saved by a foreign official from Ethiopia.

The Babylonian king crushed Zedekiah and killed him.

Devastation. Defeat. Despair. Depression.

And yet, after the devastation would come restoration, said Jeremiah.

So we come to Jeremiah 32 and a crazy, symbolic action -

With the country in ruins, under enemy occupation, God told him to buy his cousin's field. Go, buy a field in the war zone that is Jerusalem - an act of hope in a time of disaster.

To buy a field is to hope for the future.

To buy a field in a war zone. To buy an apartment in Aleppo.

What is the hope-filled crazy action to which we are called?

Amid gross inequality, to act equally.

Amid people who act with entitlement, to act equally.

Amid chasms of wealth, to include.

Buy a field in a war zone.

That's what Nordmeyer and Davidson and McMillan did.

That's what St Andrew's and Waddell did.

That's what Knox church is called to do, among ourselves and in the community around us.

There were all brutally realistic about what was happening, they were brutally realistic about the politics of it all. And then acted with outrageous hope in God.

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