

“The Great Chasm” a sermon based on Luke 16:19-31 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 29 September 2019.

Last Sunday we had a parable that began with the words “There was a rich man ...”. Today we have the second – “There was a rich man ...” At his gate is a poor man named Lazarus. The poor man dies and is carried to be with Abraham. The rich man dies and goes to Hades, where he is tormented. And the rich man looks up and far away he sees Abraham with Lazarus by his side. And Abraham says to the rich man – “... between you and us there is a great chasm that has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”

A great chasm has been fixed. A gulf. A gap. An abyss. An emptiness. Chasms are legion. Between people who are rich and people who are poor. Between people with power and people without power. Between people who colonise and people who are colonised. Between the earth and people who pollute the earth. Between people inside the gate and people just outside the gate. And sadly, this week, between young people troubled by climate change and people who patronise or ignore them. I think we caught a glimpse of a gulf when the president of the United States walked past the glaring Greta Thunberg at the Climate Summit in New York.

Chasms are legion. And they are not just external. The greater the chasm with people who are poor, the deeper the chasm within. The more we seek to fill the inner gap with things, the emptier we become within. The less we see the brokenness, the bigger the abyss inside.

Who do we see? Who are we conditioned not to see? Because, for Jesus, the chasm is about whether we see people who are poor. The chasm opens out by not seeing.

When I was a student, four of us rented a flat in an apartment building opposite the University in central Auckland. There were three flats on each floor and our front doors were at the most four metres apart. A man moved into the flat farthest away, and over several months we got to know him. We

met each other as we passed on the stairwell, coming and going, taking out the rubbish. At the most a short conversation, and certainly a nod, a greeting, an acknowledgement. Our front doors had leadlight windows although you could not see through them. One day we came home to find our neighbour had blocked up the inside of his window. We talked about it with each other, what it might mean. He was reclusive, we said, and we continued to meet him in the stairwell. Sometimes he went away for a few days. When you live so close to neighbours you notice their patterns. Then a few weeks went by and we had a conversation about our neighbour, how he might be. Within a day or so of that conversation, we came home from lectures, after dark. And there were police cars with flashing lights. And as we entered the front door of our block of flats, a body bag was being carried out. It was our neighbour. We did not learn how long it had been. But it shook each one of us, students, in our early twenties, setting out on life, trying to be faithful and compassionate, that we had not seen the neighbour literally at our door. How could we have neglected him? How might we have done better in reaching out to him? How might we have helped our apartment block become more of a community of support and care for each other?

And how we relate to people who are poor, is not just personal, crucial as that is. It is also systemic. People seeking power or a vote often look to appeal more to the middle class than the poor. The middle-class have money and a vote and when the mantra is economic growth, people who are poor do not drive growth.

Chasms are as legion now as in the time of Jesus. And they are fixed in place in our daily living, before we die. Death simply cements the trajectory. Once the rich stop going beyond their wealth in reaching towards others, a chasm grows as people without resources retreat or are pushed into enclaves.

So it becomes crucial to ask - In our daily living, how are we rescued from the chasm? How are our eyes opened? It does not happen automatically through receiving good things. Abraham says - "Remember that during your lifetime you received good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things." The rich man does not believe the Bible is sufficient. Abraham says "They have Moses and the prophets. They should listen to them." But the rich man says, no that's not

enough. “Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead ...” And, says Abraham, if they do not believe the Bible, they will not believe one who returns from the dead.

So the parable ends with a great chasm fixed in place. The more wealthy I become, the greater the chance of not seeing the poor at my gate. The more likely it is I will be closed to compassion, gated in, separated, cut off. The less likely we see the other as brother or sister, friend or neighbour.

When the colonisers came to this land, too many saw land they could farm, trees they could use, resources they could exploit. They did not recognise that the earth is the Lord’s and all who live in it, that every sparrow has value. Yes there are good and honest ways to make money, but be careful – live in the chasm, and don’t let the chasm grow inside you.

Who is Lazarus for us? Who is at our gate? Who is unwell and unable to participate in our society? Who is not paid even a living wage? Who does not have a healthy house in which to live? What is their name? How can I build a relationship with them?

The theologian Bill McKibben said this: “The rapidly rising temperature of the planet and the rapidly rising inequality on the planet are symptoms of a deep problem, a problem I would name as hyper-individualism. That’s what has allowed the richest and most powerful to feel as if they have no need for solidarity with the rest of us. That approach to life has gotten us in enormous trouble, and the only thing that can get us out of that trouble is solidarity, the kind that builds social movements and speaks truth to power.”

People seek to live in the chasm in all kinds of ways. Some help out with special programmes at their local school. Some walk their neighbourhood simply praying – “God, help me see what is here.” And they respond to what they see as best they can. Some help families that are struggling. Some visit prisoners. Some mentor mothers as they learn new skills. Some participate in Presbyterian Support’s buddy scheme.

Living in the chasm so it does not grow within.

Brian McLaren calls his sermon on this text – “scaring the hell out of rich people.” That is a need we all have.

The parable is an invitation to live in the chasm between people who are rich and people who are poor, seeing and engaging the one at our gate, building systems of equity and being a church of solidarity, not letting the chasm develop within us.

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