

Lazarus & the Rich Man

A reversal of fortune may bring joy or may bring sorrow. But it always brings a good story.

Luke is the only evangelist who preserved this marvelous parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16:19-31). (Next time you see a production of Godspell, the musical based on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, you can annoy your friends by pointing out that the scene of Lazarus and the rich man is found only in Luke.)

Incidentally, Lazarus is not the same Lazarus whom Jesus raises from the dead in John's Gospel. It's just a common name which Jesus gives to the beggar in this story.

You may have learned this as the story of Lazarus and Dives. Actually, Jesus never tells us the rich man's name. But in Latin, the man is called "dives", or "rich". Some early Catholic translations of the Scriptures into English worked from Latin instead of the original Greek, and they simply carried over the word "dives" as the man's name. The word also occurred in the title of Pope John Paul II's second encyclical back in 1980, "Dives in misericordia," or, "Rich in Mercy," a reflection on the mercy of God.

However, this particular "dives" is hardly rich in mercy. He dressed well, ate well, and ignored the poor, sick, hungry Lazarus. Notice Luke's eye for detail. The man dresses in "purple", an outrageously expensive dye associated with royalty. He wears "fine linen," not ordinary stuff, and he "feasted sumptuously," a treat most of us reserve for the rarest of occasions, but which he enjoyed "every day."

Lazarus, by contrast, lay at the gate, perhaps crippled there, poor, "covered with sores," and hungry. Dogs, symbols of uncleanliness, lick at his wounds.

A double reversal of fortune follows. Both die. Angels sweep up Lazarus to the side of Abraham, and the rich man goes to Hades. "Hades" is a Greek word for the place of the dead. Since believers had not yet come to know about the resurrection, they simply assumed that deceased evildoers went to a place of hopeless torment.

The rich man astonishingly stays in character. Finding himself thirsty, he asks Abraham to press Lazarus into service for him, a service this rich man never performed for the poor beggar. The one who never showed mercy brazenly asks for mercy from the one he wronged. Abraham, in judgment, declines.

This story would satisfy an eager listener even if it stopped here. The reversal of fortune is complete.

But Jesus goes on.

The rich man asks for mercy for his family. He wants Abraham to send someone back from the dead to tell them what to expect. Then Jesus has Abraham deliver the punchline: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

"Even if someone rises from the dead!" Well, who might that be?

The parable has become a warning to the Pharisees that if they haven't figured out who Jesus is now, they won't believe after the resurrection either. Eternal fates are not haphazard. People receive the final destiny they have earned. The Pharisees will topple from their lofty status as respected leaders of religion to become outcasts in the reign of God. That will be the ultimate reversal of fortune.

People who wait for apparitions from the afterlife to correct their behavior won't be impressed should they occur. The mystery of God has already been revealed for those with eyes to see.

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