

All preaching, perhaps all scripture, in a sense uses exaggerated language – to grab our attention and keep it, to make a point, to be remembered. This story of the rich man (or Dives in Latin) and Lazarus is one of the best known – it’s point is clear – the rich are not to be rich at the expense of the poor, they have a duty of care for those less well off than themselves; far from forgetting the poor they are to make them their prime concern. This is the sort of ‘ levelling – up’ that the trickle-down theory of economic gain fails miserably to achieve.

Let’s hear it in the words firstly of Pope Francis:

“Today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points(Evangelii Gaudium – encyclical on the proclamation of the gospel)

Pope Francis made a lot of enemies by his forthright language, Condemned like Helder Camera, as a communist for his views. “ *It is strange*” Francis himself noted that “*if I talk about this some say the Pope is communist. They do not understand that love for the poor is at the centre of the Gospel. Land, housing and work, what you struggle for, are sacred rights. To make this claim is nothing unusual; it is the social teaching of the Church.*” (Address to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements Oct. 28, 2014)

We heard it in even more radical language yesterday on the feastday of St Vincent de Paul

“when you leave prayer to help some poor (person) remember this, that the work has been done for God. Charity takes precedence over any rules.... Let us show our service to the poor ...with renewed vigour in our hearts, seeking out above all any abandoned people, since they are given to us as lords and patrons” .(Office of Readings 27/9)

Wow, now that’s telling it as it is. The poor to be not our servants but our lords. This is the Gospel as a complete reversal of our normal way of looking at things, of looking at people – or rather, so often, of not looking at people, pretending they are not really there – these poor on our streets, in our supermarkets and warehouses, in our hospitals and care homes, in our schools: patients and staff now all struggling to make a living, to survive on a minimum wage, if lucky, to rent a room, to run a vehicle, to be at home in this most beautiful country marred by capitalism’s gain, ie the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer in so many ways.

We can scale this up as Pope Francis did, by saying that the rich countries of this world have to become poorer if the worst effects of climate change are to be avoided. All sorts of “green washing” have been going on to avoid the reality of this. That looking the other way which so characterizes our present age, that denial of the other reality on our doorstep which is our true master.

But we cannot do this scaling up without that first step outwards to our immediate neighbour also – otherwise it can so easily become another form of denial. And nor can we do it in our own power. It’s a matter of resurrection, of something done to us by another – a spirit of Charity given to us by our attention to the resurrected one and his attention to us.

So as Paul says to Timothy we are to fight the good fight but in the power of God, in the hope of God coming to us in Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

It’s not a before and after thing but God in Christ stepping out with us now.