

Sermon – Proper 21 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

A Parable retold - Luke 16: 19-31

Imagine this! It is 5pm on a sultry afternoon and people are starting to leave work for their journeys home. The air is thick, so thick and heavy it feels oppressive. Just to walk along the street feels like a trek through the amazon. Sweat oozes from every pore of skin. Everyone seems to be grumpy as they congregate at the intersection waiting to cross the street, even more grumpy than other afternoons. The pavement radiates heat that would burn your skin if you dared to take off your shoes.

A heat advisory has been issued to ensure the elderly and those who are sick stay home, hopefully in air-conditioned rooms. Certainly, a better place to be than this street corner with a hundred sweaty and grumpy people. The light goes green and off they march across the street in unison, trying to avoid the melting bitumen that seems to reach up and grab the heel of the stomping shoes.

The traffic, normal for an afternoon on this busy street suddenly dries up like a stream of water in the desert. It's there one minute then gone, gobbled up by the sand. Soon enough the reason becomes clear as a procession of cars with blue and red flashing lights parades down the street and swings into the driveway of a grand home.

The reason for the disruption to the afternoon traffic is the same as it always is. It's him. That man that so divides us. Within a few minutes the sound of the afternoon resumes its din. The worker-soldiers resume their trek through the hot and humid air.

That man. He's probably come home for some 'executive time.' What does that even mean? It has been widely reported that his diary is full of these periods of executive time. You can only imagine what takes place right. TV must be definitely involved. A catch up with the kids maybe. Business strategy does need to be discussed I suppose. Food and drink are probably served. The man must be fed after all. There's rumors he survives on a high fat diet. I wonder what the butler thinks. He must have a thousand stories to tell. Wouldn't that be a great bestseller.

It's hard to fathom that life. So removed from the average person in the street. It might actually be quite lonely. Outside the mansion, the humid afternoon has stirred up a wind as a change approaches. The forecast is for a storm. Papers and so much other detritus blows all over the street and sidewalk. A sheet of newspaper from the Washington Post blows up against what looks like a woman, slumped against the huge iron gates. She looks exhausted, sunburnt, still.

It must be unbearable for her to sleep in the sun like she's doing. She has around her several hand drawn signs. "My name is Gloria. I am 55 years old and divorced. I had to flee my home because my family was being threatened. I'm homeless. Please help."

She's all padded and puffy from the multiple layers of clothes she is wearing. Gosh how terrible to be in her predicament. The white shirts soon march up to the big gate from inside and stick in a key. With a loud clunk, the lock turns and they pass through the gate and stand over her. "Gloria, we told you, you can't stay here. You have to move on." They poke at her to get her attention. When she doesn't move, they pick her up and drag her down the sidewalk. Her signs and possessions scatter to the wind. They toss her into a mobile cage on the back of a truck like common trash and she's taken away. Problem dealt with.

The bright ball of orange that is the low-slung sun hovers over the horizon for a little while longer, as if to torture the marching workers for a little longer than it should. As dusk breaks and turns into nightfall the lights along the street and in the homes flicker on. The night passes seemingly uneventfully.

By dawn the air is cooler thank goodness. Time for all the workers bees to return to their offices. The march happens in reverse this time. Hovering at the familiar intersection people's attention is drawn to newspapers in other people's hands. Across the broadsheet is shocking news. The man is dead! Choked on a burger it says. Silence and shaking heads accompany them along the street.

He wakes up disheveled and sweaty, he thinks he's had a bad dream. Maybe he is still dreaming as he gets up and staggers to the edge of the room where he is held. The smell is unbearable, and the noise of the other men is deafening. The air is thick too. "Hell, where am I," he cries.

He calls out repeatedly, but he can't wake himself up. On the back wall of the room is a small window, about 7' from the floor. It seems light outside but it's hard to see what's there. He pulls himself up to the window and rubs the dirty glass and peers outside. He yells at what appears to be a gardener tending a garden of beautiful wild flowers. "Hey, it's me. Over here." He taps on the window to try and get the gardener's attention. "Have mercy on me, please" he screams, "I need to get out of here."

A woman works alongside the gardener, gently tending the moist soil. The two work side by side stopping to admire the beautiful petals of the flowers and a butterfly that balances tenderly on the end of a leaf. "Come here," the man cries pointing at the woman. "Get me some water for I'm dying of thirst and there's no water in here."

The gardener mouths to him, "You appear to be in agony my friend. You actually look very familiar. Don't I know you. Was it you who feasted endlessly at your clubs and disparaged all those around you? Wasn't it you who bragged about your wealth? I think it was. I am sorry I can't help you. Gloria and I are enjoying our quiet time together in the garden. It is so nice. The morning air is cool and fresh. Maybe someone inside can assuage your thirst."

"Please, please help me" he yelled, "I can't make anyone to understand me in here." "Call my sons and daughter to come and get me. Tell them to ignore what I said to them and get them to come here to save me." "Tell them I was wrong!"

The gardener stopped what he was doing and leant on his shovel. All he could do was to mouth words again to the man behind the dirty window. “The truth tellers are already in the city where you come from. They have in fact been there for years, but you ignored them. They warned the people that what you were doing was unjust, punitive and just plain wrong. If you didn’t take heed of them then why would your children now.”

The man sobbed and kept tapping on the tiny little window, trying to hold the attention of the gardener. “They will listen, especially if you go,” he cried. “Talk to them, I know they will listen. They just wanted to be like me. If you go they will become better people and make amends, believe me.”

The gardener wandered over to the window. He looked up lovingly at the man, framed by the dirty window. The man’s eyes filled with tears. He stared for some time at the man, hand on his heart, gently nodding his head. “I hear you,” he mouthed. “You need me now I see, if not for you, for your children. They will never believe. They are more like you than you think. They will never believe me, or Gloria, or anyone else that tries to warn them to turn away from inflicting such pain on the poor, the alien within our land. If they can’t take heed of the truth tellers standing at the gate, then they will never believe me.”

He turned away and walked slowly back to the garden and resumed what he was doing. The man kept tapping incessantly on the little window. Eventually the sounds faded as he no longer had the strength to lift himself up to see out. Exhausted and parched the man slumped to the floor of the cage, just like Gloria did at the gate of his home.

The men who shared the cage with him, walked over him, tripping on his tattered clothes and splayed limbs. No money or power could save him now. He made a choice as we all have to do. “The love of money is the root of all evil,” we are told. “We brought nothing into the world, so we can take nothing out,” not even having the last word.

If only the man had been more aware of the suffering and need of those he ignored, those that struggled just to live in a place of peace. If he had only cared enough to help alleviate their pain. If he had cared more, the outcome for him could have been so much different.

Amen