

The Surprise of Heaven and the Blindness of Earth



Call to worship:

Let us worship the Lord together “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18–19)

Opening Prayer:

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people." **Amen** (Ephesians 1:18)

Hymn StF 103 God is love: let heaven adore him Watch on YouTube https://youtu.be/aE-0aAw6FII?si=fAmWT-ZeiJj8_fHx

God is Love, let heaven adore him;
God is Love, let earth rejoice;
let creation sing before him
and exalt him with one voice.
God who laid the earth’s
foundation,
God who spread the heaven
above,
God who breathes through all
creation:
God is Love, eternal Love.

God is Love; and Love enfolds us,
all the world in one embrace:
with unfailing grasp God holds us,
every child of every race.
And when human hearts are
breaking
under sorrow’s iron rod,
then we find that selfsame aching
deep within the heart of God.

God is Love; and though with
blindness
sin afflicts all human life,
God’s eternal loving-kindness
guides us through our earthly
strife.
Sin and death and hell shall never
o’er us final triumph gain;
God is Love, so Love for ever
o’er the universe must reign.

Prayer of adoration:

Shall we join with Mary ... “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” (Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV))

Prayer of Confession:

Let us pray with Daniel, I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying, “Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, 5we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. 6We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.9To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, 10and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets. **Amen**

(Daniel 9:4-5,9)NRSV

Hymn STF 256 When I needed a neighbour, were you there?

<https://youtu.be/grnEc0vhtyo?si=1KMMsPAYf4jR4jll>

When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a neighbour, were you there? And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter, were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there?

When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a shelter were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there?

Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there.

Wherever you travel, I'll be there.

And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter I'll be there.

Bible Reading: Luke 16:19-31

The Rich Man and Lazarus

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm 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.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

Hymn: StF 451 Open the eyes of my heart, Lord

Watch on YouTube <https://youtu.be/FAjmd-IZA4s?si=qy6vAPY0322Zjs2E>

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord,
Open the eyes of my heart;
I want to see you, I want to see you. *Rpt.*

To see you high and lifted up,
Shining in the light of your glory.
Pour out your power and love;
As we sing holy, holy, holy.

Refrain...

To see you.....

Holy, holy, holy,
Holy, holy, holy,
Holy, holy, holy,
I want to see you.

Sermon

Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, “I do not know how God will judge my life, but I trust He will look at me with mercy and compassion. I am sure of only one thing – there will be three surprises in Heaven. First, I will see some people there whom I never expected. Second, there will be some whom I expected, but they will not be there. And third, even with all my hope in God's mercy, the biggest surprise may be that I myself am there.”

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke's Gospel is also a story of surprises. The rich man, who enjoyed every comfort in this world, never imagined that his life after death would be full of pain. And he never thought that the poor beggar at his gate would one day enjoy the blessings of heaven.

Jesus told this parable, keeping in mind the common way of thinking at that time. The Pharisees believed that wealth was a clear proof of God's favour. Since God is just, they argued, He would not bless a sinful person. So, if a man was rich, it must mean God was pleased with him. In the same way, they saw poverty and sickness as signs of God's displeasure. After all, they reasoned, a just God would not allow a good person to suffer unfairly.

But in this parable, Jesus turns all these ideas upside down.

One of the first things we learn in life, without any classroom or formal education, is how to use our eyes. From birth, we discover that eyes are not only given to us to see, but also to close. We learn when to keep them open and when to shut them. As we grow, we also come to realise that blindness is not only the loss of physical sight. Blindness can also mean the inability to see what truly matters, especially the truths, the needs, and the realities around us that call for our attention.

The key verse I want to highlight today is Luke 16:23 – "In Hades, where he was tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw."

When the rich man lifted his eyes, what did he see?

Firstly, this parable encourages us to see the chasm—the great divide—between the rich man and Lazarus. Many scholars point out that this story reflects the sharp class disparity in first-century Palestine: the urban elite-controlled wealth, power, and privilege, while the rural poor lived on the edge, barely able to survive.

But beyond the social concerns, the parable also calls us to change our perspective to see with a different lens. The rich man was part of the social structure of his time, benefiting from it and yet blind to the suffering at his doorstep. Jesus invites us to open our eyes, to notice the needs around us, and to respond with compassion rather than indifference.

Sometimes we see huge problems like the rich-poor gap or workers being treated unfairly, and we think, "This is a world problem. It's too big for me."

We tell ourselves, "How can I solve this?" and we do nothing. It is clear that Lazarus was local to the rich man. Imagine the mentality of a rich man who can feast every day right in front of a person eagerly waiting to eat something that might fall from his plate. Behind his walled compound and in his position of power and privilege, he closed himself off from suffering humanity. He claimed ethnic and religious pride that is claiming Father Abraham, but refused to live as a child of Abraham and a son of the law. He stood for the Law and the Prophets in theory, but not in practice.

Luke issues an invitation, a warning, and a command to bridge the chasm in our lives today by building true community among people who are different from us and different from one another.

This is the call, a call to step into the bridge between these chasms of today in our local circumstances. Maybe Lazarus is not sitting on our front porch? Maybe Lazarus is across the same street we are living on. Are we willing to see the Lazarus? The rich man never offered his presence or compassion to Lazarus at his doorstep. True Christian discipleship calls us to see our local Lazarus and share with them that which we have received.

My second and final reflection on this parable today is about the blindness in our own lives, that is, our inability to see the true poverty around and within us. The story of the rich man and Lazarus presents a striking reversal of fortune and challenges us with the question: Who was truly poor? The rich man, wealthy in material possessions, was spiritually impoverished. The billionaire of this world ended up as a beggar after death.

Jesus is deeply concerned about this blindness of the heart. True poverty is not always material. It is the inability to recognise our dependence on God and our need for repentance. That is why this parable calls us to turn back to God.

When the rich man pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, Abraham reminded him that the message of Moses and the prophets is not outdated. The message is still alive and applicable. It is still capable of guiding us toward life and repentance.

Jesus calls us to open our eyes, acknowledge the poverty of our own hearts, and embrace the guidance God has already provided through His Word.

When you ask a person who missed the bus, or an athlete who lost the first place by just a fraction of a second, they will tell you, “Yes, I missed the opportunity.”

In the same way, the rich man in Luke’s story also says, “I missed the opportunity.” His failure was not that he did not help some stranger in a faraway land, but that he ignored the poor man who lived right at his gate, very near to him, in front of his eyes.

In the words of Felipe, a Nicaraguan peasant from the community of Solentiname:

“What I think is that neither the rich nor the poor ought to suffer the fate of those two men in the Gospel. The rich man damned for having squandered selfishly, the poor man suffering all his life even though afterwards he’s saved. Which means there shouldn’t be rich or poor—nobody should be crushed in this life; nobody should be condemned in the next. All people ought to share the riches in this life and share the glory in the next one.”

Felipe’s words echo the heart of Jesus’ teaching in this parable. God’s desire is not for some to feast while others starve, nor for us to close our eyes to the suffering of our neighbours. Instead, we are called to open our eyes, to bridge the chasms around us, to share the gifts we have received, and to live as true children of God.

So let us not miss the opportunity. Let us see Lazarus at our doorstep. Let us recognise our own poverty before God, and in humility and compassion, build a community where all can share both the riches of this life and the glory of the life to come. Amen.

Prayer of Intercession and the Lord’s prayer

Let us pray for all people in need, that God’s mercy and comfort may reach them.

Let us pray for the Church, that it may faithfully witness to God’s love and justice.

Let us pray for our communities, that they may be places of peace, care, and inclusion.

Let us pray for our nation, that leaders may govern with wisdom, compassion, and integrity.

Let us pray for peace in the world, that conflicts may cease and reconciliation flourish.

Let us pray for our local church and ecumenical partners, that we may serve together in unity.

Let us pray for children and young people, that they may grow in faith, hope, and love.

Let us pray for God’s creation, that we may protect the environment and respond to climate challenges.

Let us also pray for our personal needs and the prayer requests we received from others.

And now, with the words our Saviour taught us, we pray together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Hymn STF 415 – The Church of Christ, in every age

Watch on YouTube https://youtu.be/cGG9ht_wzK0?si=DnmmsFqfYvrNhxwm

The church of Christ in every age,
beset by change but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street,
the victims of injustice cry
for shelter and for bread to eat,
and never live before they die.

Then let the servant church arise,
a caring church that longs to be

a partner in Christ's sacrifice,
and clothed in Christ's humanity.

For Christ alone, whose blood was shed,
can cure the fever in our blood,
and teach us how to share our bread
and feed the starving multitude.

We have no mission but to serve
in full obedience to our Lord:
to care for all, without reserve,
and spread Christ's liberating word.

Blessing : May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen (2 Corinthians 13:14)