

## *Lazarus and the Rich Man*

The following selections try to capture the gist of Bonhoeffer's sermon. (Best read as if you are preaching the sermon, rather than as reading as one would read an essay.)

One cannot understand and preach the gospel concretely enough. A real evangelical sermon must be like holding a pretty red apple in front of a child or a glass of cool water in front of a thirsty person and then asking: do you want it? We should be able to talk about matters of our faith in such a way that the hands reach out for it faster than we can fill them. People should run and not be able to rest when the gospel is talked about, as long ago the sick ran to Christ to be healed when he was going around healing (Christ healed more than he converted). ... Shouldn't it really be that way wherever the good news of the God is spoken of? But it just isn't that way – we all know that.

... One repeatedly asks oneself anew why this is so. And here is one of the reasons that we simply hesitate to accept that the gospel is concrete, as close to life as it is. We have spiritualized the gospel – that is, we have lightened it up, changed it. Take our gospel of the rich man and poor Lazarus. It has become common practice to see as the whole meaning of the story that the rich should help the poor. That is, it is turned into a story illustrating a moral. But this particular story ... is something very different from that, namely, a very concrete proclamation of the good news itself. Admittedly so concretely, so powerfully worded, that we don't even take it seriously anymore.

Let us imagine how a crowd of the sick, the poor, the miserable, of poor Lazaruses, gathered around Christ, and then he began to tell the story of the poor, leprous Lazarus whom even the dogs were torturing, at the doorstep of the rich man. And when the story then took a turn with the words: "The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. Lazarus received evil things in his life, but now he is comforted here," perhaps shouts of joy passed through the crowd. That was the cool water they reached for greedily. That was the love of God itself, which spoke in this way to the poor and suffering. ... Blessed are you, you poor, for the kingdom is yours. Blessed are you who are hungry here below, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep here, for you will laugh. Rejoice and leap for joy, for your reward is great in heaven.

Those are the beatitudes in Luke [6:20-23]. Nothing is said here about the poor in spirit [Matt. 5:3], nothing about hunger for righteousness [Matt. 5:6], but blessed are you poor, you hungry, you who are weeping, as we know you in the world. Blessed are you Lazaruses of all the ages, for you shall be consoled in the bosom of Abraham.

Blessed are you outcasts and outlaws, you victims of society, you men and women without work, you broken down and ruined, you lonely and abandoned, rape victims and those who suffer injustice, you who suffer in body and soul; blessed are you, for God's joy will come over you and be over your head forever. That is the gospel, the good news of the dawning of the new world, the new order, which is God's world and God's order. The deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, and the gospel is preached to the poor [see Luke 7:22].

... Let us hear the other, the terrible other side. There is the rich man, who dressed in purple and fine linen. About him it says: "The rich man also died and was buried." That already sounds very harsh. And now in hell he must suffer the torment of eternal thirst, because he was full and satisfied on earth. He has to see poor Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham and beg that Lazarus quench his thirst only for a moment. But even that can't be. "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things." And behind this we hear the words: Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you who dress in purple and live happily in luxury, for you shall suffer eternal thirst [see Luke 6:24-26].

Blessed poor, outcast, leprous Lazarus yesterday and today, for you have a God. Woe to you who live happily in luxury and are respected yesterday and today. That is the most concretely preached good news of God for the poor.

But now we must listen to quite a few shocked objections (criticisms) before we continue.

There are always those in our midst who know better than the New Testament itself what the New Testament may and may not say. What we have just said here is, of course, a rough interpretation of the New Testament intended for rough, common people. It couldn't be about that. If something in the New Testament really sounds as rough as what we just said, you have to take it and spiritualize it. We call that "sublimating," that is, refining, elevating, spiritualizing, moralizing. It's not just simply the physically poor who are blessed and the physically rich who would be damned. But the main thing is always what a person's attitude is toward his poverty and toward his wealth. The external aspect doesn't matter at all, but rather the attitude matters: rich in God or poor in God.

The most dangerous thing about this criticism is that it contains some truth, but basically it is intended only to provide us with an excuse. It is so terribly easy to back away from all so-called external conditions and focus on the attitude: rich on the outside but being poor in one's so-called attitude. It is so terribly easy to say that it is

vulgar to understand the gospel as if it were about outward poverty and riches, while it really depends on the inner aspect. Now, I ask you, where in the story of the poor Lazarus does it say anything about his inner life? Who tells us that he was a man who within himself had the right attitude toward his poverty? Just the opposite, he may have been quite a pushy poor man, since he lay down in front of the rich man's doorstep and did not go away. Who tells us anything about the soul of the rich man?

That is precisely the frightening thing about this story – there is no moralizing here at all, but simply talk of poor and rich and of the promise and the threat given to one and the other. Here these external conditions are obviously not treated as external conditions but are taken unbelievably seriously. Why did Christ heal the sick and suffering if he didn't consider such external conditions important? Why is the kingdom of God equated with the deaf hear, the blind see? --- And where do we get the incredible presumption to spiritualize these things that Christ saw and did very concretely?

We must end this audacious, sanctimonious spiritualization of the gospel. Take it as it is, or hate it honestly!

And there is not lack of hatred precisely because people took the gospel to be as honest as it was.

What does a gospel that was brought to the weaklings, the common people, the poor, and the sick have to do with us? We are men and women healthy and strong. We disdain the mass of Lazaruses. We disdain the gospel of the poor. It undermines our pride, our race, our strength. We are rich, but with pride. That is certainly honestly said. But it is also said incredibly carelessly and at the same time so full of illusions. It is so easy to disdain the masses of Lazaruses. But if just one of these would really meet you face to face – the unemployed Lazarus, Lazarus the accident victim, Lazarus whose ruin you caused, your own begging child as a Lazarus, the helpless and desperate mother, Lazarus who has become a criminal, the godless Lazarus – can you go up to him or her and say: I disdain you, Lazarus. I scoff at the good news that makes you glad? Can you really do that? And if you can't do that, why then do you act as if it were anything great at all to be able to do that?

But also, couldn't it possibly already be a mockery in itself to console those who live in suffering and misery with the prospect of a better future in another world? Doesn't it almost sound as if one is just trying to keep these unfortunates from rebelling here against their fate? As if one is calling them blessed just so they will stay quiet, as they are now, and not bother the others? Isn't it downright cynical to talk about consolation in heaven because one does not want to give consolation on earth? Is

this gospel for the poor not basically the deception and dumbing down of the people? Does it not show that one does not take the suffering at all seriously but hides cynically behind pious phrases? Oh, countless times it has happened that way - and who would deny it? - right up to our present time. And millions have become estranged from the gospel for this reason!

But a look at the Gospels shows us what is different here. Jesus calls the poor blessed, but he does heal them, too, already here. Yes, the kingdom of God is at hand, for the blind see and the lame walk. He takes suffering so seriously that in a moment he must destroy it. Where Christ is, the power of the demons must be broken. That is why he heals, and that is why he says to his disciples: If you believe in me, you will do greater works than I. The kingdom of God is still just beginning to appear. The acts of healing are like heat lightning, like flashes of lightning from the new world.

...

And now, the last questions: Who is Lazarus? Who is the rich man? And finally, what should the rich man do?

Who is Lazarus? You know it yourself: Your poorer brother or sister who cannot cope with life's outward or its spiritual aspects, often foolish, often impudent, often pushy, often godless, but yet endlessly needy and - whether knowing it or not - suffering, who craves the crumbs from under your table. You may think with a little self-pity that you yourself are Lazarus. God alone knows if you are. But always keep asking if you are not perhaps after all the rich man. Who is Lazarus? Always the other one, the crucified Christ himself, who meets you in the form of a thousand people you would look down upon. Yes, he is the eternal Lazarus himself.

And now we must ask again: Who is Lazarus? And here at the end, in all humility, the last possibility must be considered, at the limits of all human and divine possibilities: We are all Lazarus before God. The rich man, too, is Lazarus. He is the poor leper before God. And only when we know that we are all Lazarus, because we all live through the mercy of God, do we see Lazarus in our neighbor.

Who is the rich man? Our story does not answer this question. Certainly we are not rich. We are not full and satisfied. We do not live happily in luxury. Really not? Do you mean that seriously? Even when you meet Lazarus? Or does he not meet you? Are we really not the rich man? Another story gives us an answer to this question: the story of the rich young man, who was very devout and very righteous, but was sad when he was told to leave his possessions, and went away [see Matt. 19:16-22]. That is the rich man. What about us?

And now: What should the rich man do? The answer to this question can be found in the story of the Good Samaritan [Luke 10:25-37]. In our story there is only this: The rich man should see that death is standing behind him and Lazarus, and that behind Lazarus God himself, Christ is standing with eternal good news. We should see – see poor Lazarus in his full frightening misery and behind him Christ, who invited him to his table and calls him blessed. Let us see you, poor Lazarus, let us see you, Christ, in poor Lazarus. Oh, that we might be able to see. Amen.

From the book of sermons\* editor Isabel Best: It is thought that Bonhoeffer preached this sermon in Berlin, on the First Sunday after Trinity, May 29, 1932. His "woe to you who dress in purple" implicates the rich in his time as well. "Our pride, our race, our strength" echoes the rhetoric of the pro-Nazi "German Christians."

\* *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited and introduced by Isabel Best. Fortress Press, 2012. (Pages 34 – 40)