

Upside down and no way back

Luke 16:16-31

The problem with the Old Testament is... it's difficult. Some of the stories are violent. Some of the ethics seem impossibly high. Some of the rituals and ceremonies and sacrifices seem unusual and costly. Some of God's actions seem strange and incomprehensible.

So a lot of Christians just ditch the Old Testament. Don't read it. Don't refer to it. Treat it as if it's been replaced by Jesus. The trouble with that is, Jesus made a point of saying that He hadn't come to throw it out at all. So we may need to re-evaluate what we do with it ourselves.

In Luke 16:16-18, Jesus talks about the Law and the Prophets being proclaimed until John. The Law and the Prophets refers to the Bible that had been written up to that time - what we call the Old Testament. 'John' refers to John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, who began a new time preaching about the Kingdom of God breaking into this world with the coming of... Jesus.

These verses are saying that the whole Old Testament - all of the laws, all of the prophecies, all of this sacred book that the religious people like the Pharisees were so wound up about following to the letter - all of it was pointing to Jesus, the One the religious people were sneering at and rejecting. But, Jesus says in v.17, He hasn't come to *replace* what God had already shared with us in the Old Testament - but rather to *fulfil* it.

Every ritual of sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins that people had been taught to offer - it was all to be fulfilled in Jesus final, once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. Every ceremonial thing God's people had been taught to do as pictures to understand how to relate to God - it was all fulfilled in Jesus' coming, living, dying and rising again.

Every violent sin of human kind was paid for, and every violent judgement of God upon that sin was borne, on the cross of Jesus. And every impossibly high ethical demand for how to live by God's standards - Jesus would live it all out perfectly on our behalf.

Jesus hadn't come to teach us to be more lax with our ethics. Actually, in v. 18 He gives an example of how He taught a higher ethical standard than religious people assumed from the Old Testament. He challenges the practice of quietly slipping out of marriage that some of these 'religious'

people were up to; and He also puts the blame for adultery at the man's door here (the women were typically the ones who got the blame in that culture).

This is not the whole picture; there's more teaching about marriage and divorce in Old and New Testament that helps those of us affected by these things - and you can have a chat with me if it would help to look into that. But this is an example that Jesus gives to say:

'I haven't come to tell you that God wants to compromise with you and set the bar lower for a truly full life. I've come to meet the standards for you, and gift you a truly full life belonging to God. A life for you to grow into, as you grow into the family likeness.'

Jesus (and John before Him) declares that with Jesus' arrival in the world, the Kingdom of God has come. We've learned from Luke's book already a lot about what that means. The Kingdom of God is where God is King, rather than you or anything else in your life. It's where people are set free from the things that rob them of real life - sin, death, poverty, illness, exclusion, fear, debt - it's beginning to happen now and it's being completed in eternity.

It's a changing of sides - to come into the Kingdom is to change allegiance, step over the border, and belong to God instead of the world. It's a community of people who have defined themselves by that, and live that out together.

And it is a place where God wants to see His people pay attention to, and do something about, the needs of those before them. To have Jesus as King, and to meet the needs you see before you, go together. You can't have one without the other.

And in v.16, we read Jesus saying that 'the Kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.' A better translation of the Greek (which for those who are interested in these things, is in the middle passive voice) is: '... and everyone is being urged into it.' Jesus urges you to come into the Kingdom with Him.

If Jesus hasn't come to replace the Old Testament but fulfil it, how might that change our approach to it?

In vv.19-31, Jesus tells a story where the rich man is given no name, but the poor man is. That's the first upside down thing about this story. It's how the Kingdom of God reverses the world and its way. The rich man is faceless, a

stranger, and soon to be an outcast. The poor man is personalised, made fully human, identified with. *Jesus gives him a name.* 'His name is... Lazarus.'

There's lots of other things turned upside down in this story. The rich man starts off wealthy, well and stuffed full of feasting. Purple clothing and white linen were for the super rich. The Paradise Papers people of the day.

Lazarus starts off in all sorts of need. He's crippled - that's why he was 'laid at a gate' to beg. He can't work. And in this time and place where there was no welfare state, or in any time and place where a welfare state doesn't work, not being *able* to work puts you in the gutter.

He's lost his health - he's covered in sores. He's lost his dignity - the mangy street dogs are licking them. He's got no money, no shelter, no prospects, no hope. And he is experiencing no compassion or hospitality from the man whose gate is there to keep out the riff raff.

That's where these two people start. But then everything turns upside down at the point of their deaths (which is where the Kingdom of God gets fully realised in all our lives). For the rich man, it's the tormenting experience of constantly being in a need he can't have met. It's new to him, but sadly, he's going to have to get used to it. It isn't going to change.

But for Lazarus, there's a welcome to a place of comfort, refreshment and lavish hospitality. It's new to him, and happily, he's going have to get used to it! It isn't going to change! Lazarus is in the 'bosom of Abraham,' the Greek says. Why does Jesus use Abraham in His story? Abraham is famous for his lavish hospitality.

Back in Genesis 18, when Abraham sees three travellers in need of rest, food and shelter, he goes to town on offering them all of these things. People only travelled great distances like these three visitors did when they were in great need. They were refugees. Abraham honours them, welcomes them, and spends himself on them. Abraham was a well off man seeing needy people and meeting their needs. Little did he know he was really hosting God Himself.

In contrast, the rich man in Jesus' story was a well off person seeing a needy person and ignoring his need. Little did he know he was really shunning God Himself. (Didn't Jesus say, 'Whatever you didn't do for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you didn't do for me'?)

Remember, part of the upside-down-ness of the Kingdom of God is that the poor will become rich, and the rich will become poor. So consider carefully who you offer hospitality to in this life, and who you don't. Consider who is 'at *your gate*' - your responsibility because you see them on your street, in your class, outside your workplace. Just knowing their name won't cut it. It didn't for the rich man. Offering them hospitality - *that's* the way to follow in Abraham's footsteps.

If you've got money to use, great. If you've got a home to offer, a meal to share, brilliant. If you're not in a position to do such things, it doesn't mean you have no hospitality to offer. Friendship. Speaking up on their behalf. Time. Share what you can. And remember, you're not alone. As a church, we can share with each other the needs that we come across, and we can come together in meeting them. Let's keep that going.

Who is 'at your gate' that you can offer hospitality to?

The rich man found that the Kingdom of God turned life upside down. But he also discovered - the very, very hard way - that there was no way back from where he met his destiny.

Nobody likes talking about Hell (apart from maybe some angry sounding preachers you can imagine or even remember). I'm pretty sure Jesus did this more with concern than with relish, but the fact is, nobody in the Bible talks more about Hell than He does.

Some people like to soften the blow of this by claiming 'Jesus isn't talking about *me* though - He talks about this stuff to the super rich and the super religious, hypocrites who need a wake up call.' As if the rich and the religious are the only people who need warned about how they treat God and treat other people. There are lessons and warnings for all of us here.

And some people like to point out that 'Hell' is not really the word used in this passage. The Greek is 'Hades' - the place of the dead. They say, 'You shouldn't assume from a story Jesus tells about a common idea of the time about Hades that there's this literal place called Hell that people will be tormented in for ever and ever.'

I think we may be doing Jesus a disservice here when we don't let His voice pack the punch that He means it to, and that if we're honest, we always feel at first glance before we reason away what we've just read. And I don't think

we're helping anyone who has not been reconciled with God yet by trying to stop them getting this massive boot up the backside that Jesus has to offer them. It's part of 'being forcefully urged' into the Kingdom of God.

You see, it's true that there are things about Jesus' story that are really a lot like folk tales that others told in His day. People going to Hades. The idea of the dead being sent back to warn the living.

But it's the ways that Jesus story is *different* to those first century folk tales that causes His first hearers to sit up and take notice of what He's teaching about eternal things. The only question is whether today's hearers - and by that I mean you, right now - take these things as seriously as Jesus meant them.

In the old stories, people would go to Hades when they died. And there would be a coming and going and mixing between people. But not in *this* story that Jesus is telling. Jesus has Abraham say in v.26 that 'there is a great chasm between us and you that *has been fixed* - and nobody can cross from one side of the divide to the other.'

That was new. That was different. That was noticeable to the audience. 'Wait - is Jesus saying that, at the point of death, there's an eternal separation?' Yes. That's what He's saying. The rich man is on the wrong side of it. There's no coming across. *And there's no going back to try again.*

Jesus isn't in the business of messing about with the things of eternal destiny. What kind of God incarnate would teach the reality of eternal separation so seriously and tell us later, 'Nah, I was only kidding'? This story is a warning. *Be reconciled to God, and live under His leadership now.* Like Abraham did. Like Lazarus did, who had no choice but to depend on God, because nobody else would help. Like the rich man *didn't*, and paid the price.

Jesus doesn't tell this story to wind you up, write you off and tell you that you are definitely going to Hell. He tells it so that you *won't*. So that you will hear the warnings about where we'll end up when we're not in God's Kingdom, and respond to the insistent urging to come home to God through Him. The warning and the invitation all comes *now*, in this life. Because once this life is done and dusted, there are no more warnings to offer. That's the other thing that's new about Jesus' take on the local folk tales.

They always had it that someone would come back from Hades, the place of the dead, to warn the living to change direction. Centuries later, the folk tales

still imagine it. (Think of Marley and Marley in Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol' visiting Scrooge from the dead to warn him to change his ways.) The new thing in Jesus' story was that, when the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent from the dead that his brothers might be warned about this eternal destiny, the answer is: 'No.'

Actually, the answer is: 'They don't need that. They've got all they need to discover the way to forever life with God rather than forever separation from God. It's there in 'Moses and the Prophets' (that's the Bible being referred to again). 'Yes, yes...' says the rich man, 'I know, they should read their Bibles and then they'll get it, but look, if someone from the *dead* gets their jaw-dropped attention, *then* they'll change course.'

Have a look at the end of the story in v.31. In the story, it's Abraham's turn to speak; but it's hard to miss that it's really Jesus the Author making a point about Himself now: 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets (that is, if they ignore what the Bible tells them), then they won't be convinced even if someone *rises from the dead*.'

What would it take to convince you to stop living life the way you are, and start living with Jesus as King instead? What if Jesus appeared, risen and alive, right in front of you? Then you'd believe, right? Well, read the end of Matthew's gospel and you'll find that the super rich and super religious *still* didn't change course and follow Jesus, even when they realised it was true that He had risen to life.

The fact was, they just didn't want to. How about you - is it that you *don't* believe that Jesus broke death and holds eternal life and eternal death in His hands, or that you *don't want* to believe it, so you won't look too closely in case it's true?

Let me finish by laying out some questions for you to consider. These all matter, because Jesus told a story here that teaches that your eternal destiny gets defined by your answer to these questions and the life that flows from that answer.

Are you listening to what the Bible is saying? Now of course, to be able to say 'yes' to that, you'd need to be reading it (not 'I used to read it when I was a kid,' but reading it and being shaped by it now). You'd have to trust it. So you'd have to believe what it promises and do what it commands.

What you read in the Old Testament you'll find pointing towards and being fulfilled in Jesus. And what you find in the New Testament you'll find pointing back to and being sourced in Jesus. The way to life with God, now and forever, is found in these pages.

Did Jesus rise from the dead? If you're listening to what your Bible says, then you'll be saying 'yes' to that. The whole thing points towards or back to Jesus doing this, as Jesus Himself says at the end of Luke's gospel. And listening to what the Bible has to say, the evidence is really good that it *is* true that Jesus rose from death.

If you don't believe Jesus rose from death, I'd love to ask you, why not? Perhaps you've based that on a really thought through reflection on what really happened; in the unlikely history of the church exploding like a big bang from 30 AD through to 2017 and the unlikely transformation of people you know and love. Or perhaps you haven't reflected on it at all yet.

Either way, I'd love to know why you think Jesus didn't rise from the dead. Because I can't see it. If you want to chat with me about why I really, really believe He did, and what I base that on, let me know.

Are you going to live under Jesus' lead? If you're going to say 'yes' to that, you'll need to be offering hospitality to the people whose needs are laid at your gate. Leaving a life of purple robes and fine linen behind, and ignoring Lazarus no more.

The truth is, some people don't want to change life, because they are comfortable in the one they're in. No need to read the Bible, consider whether Jesus really rose from death - and no need to make big changes to host the poor. Except, of course, Jesus says that there's an eternal need for you to do all these things.

(If there's time, the below quote from Tom Wright)

We have all seen him. He lies on a pile of newspapers outside a shop doorway, covered with a rough blanket. Perhaps he has a dog with him for safety. People walk past him, or even step over him. He occasionally rattles a few coins in a tin or cup, asking for more. He wasn't there when I was a boy, but he's there now, in all our cities, east, west, north and south.

As I see him, I hear voices. It's his own fault, they say. He's chosen it. There are agencies to help him. He should go and get a job. If we give him money

he'll only spend it on drink. Stay away - he might be violent. Sometimes, in some places, the police will move him on, exporting the problem somewhere else. But he'll be back.

And even if he isn't, there are whole societies like that. They camp in tin shacks on the edges of large, rich cities. From the door of their tiny makeshift shelters you can see the high-rise hotels and office blocks where, if they're very lucky, one member of the family might work as a cleaner.

They have been born into debt, and in debt they will stay, through the fault of someone rich and powerful who signed away their rights, their lives in effect, a generation or two ago, in return for arms, a new presidential palace, a fat Swiss bank account. And even if rich and poor don't always live side by side so blatantly, the television brings us together.

So we all know Lazarus. He is our neighbour. Some of us may be rich, well dressed and well fed, and walk past him without even noticing; others of us may not be so rich, or so finely clothed and fed, but compared with Lazarus we're well off. He would be glad to change places with us, and we would be horrified to share his life, even for a day.