

The clue is in the Name

A close reading of today's Gospel reveals some very interesting things but I wonder if the most obvious one is the one we often miss and fail to properly understand: the rich man is anonymous whereas the poor man is not. Now of itself this may not seem particularly revealing, however in the context of the story it has a real resonance which should not go unmissed.

When we read the story, we may get the impression that the rich man lives completely aloof and separate from the conditions in which Lazarus finds himself. The rich man may have known Lazarus was at his gate, but for all intents and purposes he takes no notice of him whatsoever, being completely indifferent to his situation. But now listen to what the rich man says in his torment: *Father Abraham, pity me and send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am in agony in these flames*. The implication is that the rich man actually knew Lazarus by his name, and that puts a totally different dimension on their relationship and on the rich man's whole demeanour towards Lazarus. What seemed at first unrelated and distant, has now in effect become individualised. What seemed remote and unspecific, is made authentic and personal. It is no longer hypothetical, but something real and tragic and the disconnect that we may reasonably assume existed between the two, now vanishes, so that what is being highlighted is not just the indifference of the rich man towards Lazarus, but the fact that such indifference persists even though he knew him by name.

Indifference is perhaps the greatest modern day threat to our faith. For many people, what was once a personal relationship with Jesus has now become distant and aloof, and the danger is that in the midst of our own riches and wealth, we shall have soon forgotten that we once knew him. Soon we shall no longer see him nor take any interest in him. It is a profoundly dangerous path for our society to take, because of what it means for our relationships with God and with one another. We may think that we'll all be okay, but in the long run, if we become so detached from each other to the extent that in spite of knowing each other by name, we no longer bother to take any interest or show any concern, then any communal understanding of mercy and compassion, of care and trust will quickly wither by virtue of the loss of a personal experience of these realities. This is why recovering our sense of relationship with one another through our relationship Jesus, is the massive challenge which we as Christians face in our ever increasingly indifferent society. Communities flourish when individuals take responsibility for each other. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus is warning us how if we are not careful, things can quickly unwind and become dysfunctional.

Lazarus is the only character in any of Jesus' parables, who is given a name. It is a name which means "God is my help". Furthermore it is significant that Lazarus is given qualities which are hardly God like in any sense, and which on an individual basis, we can so easily become indifferent to. But isn't that the point? Doesn't God urge us constantly to examine our lives to renew the relationships we've become indifferent to and so re-engage with him. It is through Jesus, God's son, a man of sorrows, despised and rejected by many that this re-engagement is made real. We need to overcome our indifference and re-acquaint ourselves with him and know him by his name – *the one who saves*