

## Our own future is inextricably bound to others and our world.

Luke 16:19-31

English poet John Donne once wrote: “No man is an island entire of itself” No one is an island entire of themselves; to live/exist is to live/co-exist with others.

I was reminded of Donne’s words by this morning’s graphic Gospel story of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man is surrounded by so much wealth, so much food on his table that he ignores, or is unaware of, the poor beggar at his door whose only friends are the dogs that come and lick his sores.

John Donne might be right – no person is an island entire of themselves – but sometimes it may well seem that through our own ingenuity and efforts we can get by very well on our own, thank you very much. One can almost hear the rich man saying “Am I my brother’s/sister’s keeper?”

Sometimes being born into a lucky country, like Australia, can almost seem like a right we have earned rather than an accident of birth or just a case of good fortune. Complacency and an indifference to others can creep into our outlook on life as occurred for the rich man in today’s story.

So then, let us return to Donne’s statement that no one is an island entire of themselves. What can we, blessed as we are with good fortune, learn from Jesus’ story? That the rich man’s salvation is inextricably bound to Lazarus; that our own destiny is bound to our fellow human beings, both at the level of our personal lives and with all the peoples with whom we share this world.

At the national level politicians would have us believe we still live in a world where narrow national self interest can be maintained; that the needs of asylum seekers, for example, are not our concern, that as a ‘clever country’ we can be insulated from the problems affecting the rest of the world. But if our future is inextricably bound to earth and all humanity, then solutions become more complex, involving multilateral cooperation, and compromise is needed to ensure the well being of all people. This is becoming clear in the area of global climate change and the earth’s future.

And what is true at the global level is also certainly true at the personal and local level. This morning we heard from Alice about the Safe Shelter program run here over the past winter providing emergency accommodation for ‘rough sleepers’. We were reminded we are part of a community and cannot remain indifferent to the needs of those around us, less fortunate than ourselves. – ***We are not entire of ourselves.***

Deep within us we know, both with our head and heart, that true community and peace are found where there is compassion and sensitivity to the needs of others with whom we share our daily lives.

But let us look more closely at the parable Jesus told about Lazarus and the rich man.

The rich man in Jesus’ story was not a bad or evil person but had simply become complacent. From his favoured position in life all was well with the world and so there was little reason to question the status quo or try to change things.

Perhaps this becomes clearer when we consider the difference between the sin of omission and commission. A sin of commission is where we do something that causes hurt or suffering to others. At the extreme, this may be to rob a bank or steal from someone for example, or in less obvious ways, say hurtful things to someone or about someone to others. We commit, perhaps intentionally, some action that causes hurt to others.

The sin of omission is less obvious but can still cause hurt or feelings of guilt within ourselves. For example, we learn about a terrible natural disaster on the other side of the world and decide to send off a donation to the United Nations or Red Cross, but never quite manage to do so. Or we are aware of a friend struggling emotionally with some problem or feeling lonely, and intend to give them a ring or pop in for a visit, but never quite get round to doing so.

In his story Jesus does not depict the rich man as a cruel or heartless person who laughs at Lazarus' predicament or sneers as he passes by. He simply seems oblivious to the plight of Lazarus or fails to understand that his own destiny is bound up with Lazarus, his fellow human being. Indeed when he discovers himself in Hades, the rich man's concern is for other members of his family, that they should be warned about the dangers of indifference to the suffering of others. His was not a crime of commission, but simply omission. He didn't cause the suffering but omitted or failed to respond to the suffering and the needs of others.

Sadly the rich man of the story had become afflicted with the curse of indifference. From his favoured position he had failed to understand the interdependence of all human life, that our good fortune brings with it a responsibility to also care for those around us, less fortunate than ourselves, such as Lazarus at the door. We are, in fact, our brother's/sister's keeper.

And at times it is not even indifference but feelings of helplessness that prevents us from responding to the needs of others. When faced by the level of suffering from famine in the Horn of Africa, for example, we can become overwhelmed by the task and feel *'what's the point? What difference will my \$50 or \$100 make? Or, when closer to home, faced with 'rough sleepers' on the streets of Canberra, think 'what can we do? Surely that's a matter for the ACT Government to solve.'*

There is the story of a young woman walking along a beach who discovers thousands of starfish washed ashore by a king tide and left stranded on the hot sand to die. Moved by compassion she begins picking them up one by one casting them back into the sea and life. A stranger sees hers and calls out *'Are you crazy, what's the point? There are thousands of them. You'll never get through them all. What difference will it make?'* The girl smiled, picked up another starfish saying, *'It will make a difference for this one'* as she cast it back into the life giving water.

I began this morning with the well known quote from John Donne – *No (one) is an island entire of itself – but people rarely go on to complete the quote in which Donne says: "No (one) is an island entire of (themselves); every one is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.....Any (person's) death diminishes me, because I am involved in humankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee."*

God has bound us together in this bundle of life. We share a common world, a common humanity, and we cannot be at peace with ourselves if we fail to accept our shared responsibility for those around us and the one interdependent world in which we live. Amen