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## THE PARABLE OF THE SIX BROTHERS

A sermon by Ross Langmead

(The rich man and Lazarus)

Luke 16:19-31, Westgate Baptist Community, 26 Sep 2004

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In the *Good Weekend* supplement to *The Age* last weekend there was an amazing article on John Alexander, who runs Kerry Packer's multi-billion dollar empire. He takes home nearly four million dollars a year. And he enjoys it. His friends say that he knows where to get the very best cashmere socks. He knows the best restaurants, the best antique dealers and the best accountant. He can spot J P Tods, which are apparently very expensive Italian shoes, at fifty paces. He believes passionately that imported Spanish anchovies are superior to Italian ones. In his extravagant Sydney home he has impeccable taste and collects expensive sculpture.

When he was editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* he blocked articles on the disabled and the poor. "We don't want losers in the *Herald*", was a favourite phrase of his. When someone wrote an article on the homeless, he said, "We write stories for those who *read* newspapers, not those who sleep under them".

John Alexander was living in his own rich world and wanted to block out of view any disturbing news of the poor around him.

He reminds me of the rich man in Jesus' parable, which we heard in today's gospel passage, in Luke 16:19-31. The story is usually called "The rich man and Lazarus". I'm going to follow the New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias and call it "The parable of the six brothers", and why I call it that will gradually become clear.

Jesus told brilliant stories. They must have had a powerful impact on his audiences, because he started with something normal and then usually came a reversal, an upset. People began with the "Normal" view of the world, and he knocked them off their feet with the "Kingdom" view of the world. He was talking about the upside-down kingdom of God, where justice doesn't look like the justice we see every day. It upset people then, and I have to say that when I open my ears and listen to it today it disturbs me too.

### THE STORY

The rich man in Jesus' story wore purple linen and feasted every day. Most Jews thought that wealth was a sign of God's favour. Some Christians today still preach this, though I don't know how, when they look at the teaching of Jesus and the prophets.

Lazarus, on the other hand, was a destitute beggar, just hoping for a few handouts from the rich man. The people in Jesus' time ate with their hands. The really rich people used to take a loaf of bread, eat a bit of it, wipe their hands on the rest, using it as a sort of serviette, and then throw it under the table. Sometimes the dogs ate it, and sometimes it

was thrown out in the street for beggars to eat. To get some of this cast off bread was Lazarus's dream. But he competed with the dogs in the street, who even licked his sores. Lazarus was poor. Lazarus was sick. Lazarus was homeless. Lazarus was religiously unclean.

The gate he sits at is the symbol of the huge class difference between them. Lazarus is kept outside the gate. The gates of Jerusalem were meant to be where justice was dispensed. But this gate is the gate of injustice. It's the gate that protects the rich from the poor.

I'm reminded of the airport at Dhaka in Bangladesh, where Alison and I were six years ago. The poor were outside the airport in the stifling humidity. We tourists were inside the air-conditioned airport, part of a jet set which is unimaginable to the poorest people in Bangladesh. Armed guards held back the beggars, who were not allowed near the terminal. They were not to disturb our comfort. But I could see them through the plate-glass windows. They were "outside the gate". The image of these beggars has remained in my mind ever since.

Then comes the shock to Jesus' listeners. Lazarus dies and what? He goes to a sort of heaven, where Abraham, Moses and the prophets are having a feast, and Lazarus gets the seat next to Abraham — in the bosom of Abraham, the text says. (By the way, next time you hear the song, "Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham", remember that this is where the phrase comes from — it's a justice song, a song of the poor, longing for God to take pity on them.)

The rich man, on the other hand, dies and has his fancy funeral, but then what? He goes to the punishing flames of Hades. Now Hades, in first century Judaism, was not the same as hell, which later came to mean eternal damnation. It was a place where you stayed for some time, a place where justice is done, a bit like purgatory, an uncertain existence reflecting the life you led on earth. This is a story, remember, not a theological explanation of heaven and hell.

The rich man is in agony. He sees Lazarus feasting far away and calls out. Still acting the boss-man, he commands Abraham to send Lazarus as a servant to give him water. What a cheek! What does Abraham say? In effect he says, "The life you chose, ignoring the poor outside your gate, has led to this great chasm between you and us. The gate you used to keep others out has become the chasm which now keeps you out. This is God's justice."

Does the rich man repent? No, he tries to negotiate selfishly for his family! "I beg you to send Lazarus to my family for I have five brothers. They need to be warned so they don't end up here like me!" There are six brothers in this family. It seems they're all rich and need special revelation from God to get through their thick skulls that to ignore the poor is to be disobedient to God.

Abraham says, putting the knife in, “It’s all plainly laid out in the scriptures. Read Moses and the prophets; your brothers should listen to them.” Again the rich man tries to plead for mercy. But Abraham says, “Even if someone were to be raised from the dead (and what do you think Jesus was referring to here?), the rich brothers would not listen”.

I call it the parable of the six brothers because the rich and hardhearted are the people Jesus was aiming the story at. I wonder if our ears are open to this disturbing message.

If you’re like me you don’t immediately identify with the rich people in Jesus’ stories. I mean, none of us are really wealthy are we? A bit of reflection, however, shows that you and I are among the richest people on earth.

Do we have a roof over our head? Do we have clean running water? Did we have the chance to complete primary school? Do we receive more than a dollar a day? Do we have access to a doctor if we are sick? Do we eat more than one meal a day? Can we refrigerate our food? Can we buy things that make life pleasant and convenient, such as cars, TVs, washing machines, heaters and air-conditioners? Can we enjoy recreation, seeing films, taking holidays and pursuing hobbies? Are we more or less in control of our lives, able to decide what we are going to do?

All of these things add up to us being in the wealthiest few per cent of the earth’s population. If the world were a village of a hundred people, we would without doubt be living in the chief’s hut, so good is our lot.

Now some people point out that Abraham, one of the good guys in Jesus’ parable, was a rich man himself. There’s nothing wrong with having resources, is there? Jesus’ message was clear and consistent: It’s how you share your resources that counts in the kingdom of God. If we find ourselves wealthy (and we didn’t rip others off along the way), fine — but how much can we give away, and how can we work energetically for justice?

Others weasel out of Jesus’ challenge by reading Paul and taking Martin Luther’s interpretation of his theology: We’re accepted by God only by faith, not by trying to do good. “If you push the demand for justice too hard you’re preaching a gospel of good works”, they say. But Jesus sees God’s forgiving welcome as intimately linked to the way we respond to God’s call. To experience God’s love is to share God’s love for the poor and outcast. It’s the heart of the way of Jesus.

So how do we respond to this confronting parable if we realise that we’re the brothers? Jesus was saying, “You’ve heard the call already — seek justice and be radically generous to the poor.”

There are many ways we can respond practically to his call, but today I’d like to mention just two, which in themselves are only just a beginning, but which are topical.

## **THE ELECTION**

We're facing an election in two weeks' time. It is our one chance every three years to tell our politicians what sort of country we want. I hope you vote for someone who stands up for the poor. The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council has put out a very helpful and simple pamphlet to help Christians. It identifies four issues we can speak out on, and I agree with their choice.

The first is **poverty** in Australia. There are many poor people in Australia and the gap has been widening for three decades.

The second is **fair trade** relationships. Australia has signed a Free Trade Agreement with the US which limits the rights of governments to protect consumers, and gives a green light to free enterprise to control most areas of life. How will we guarantee that we can protect the most vulnerable and deliver essential services to all?

The third is **detention** of asylum seekers. The churches have taken the lead in challenging governments to welcome and protect these most vulnerable of the world's people.

The fourth is indigenous **reconciliation**. Again the churches have been outspoken in saying that we need to resolve the long history of oppression and disadvantage that surrounds our relationship with the indigenous people of Australia.

The pamphlet has straightforward questions to ask of candidates. It says we have a part to play in what our society is becoming.

Even though it is not simple, I urge you to take into account the teaching of Jesus as you cast your vote on October the ninth.

## **THE MICAH CHALLENGE**

The other way we can respond is by supporting the Micah Challenge. I'm quite excited by this movement, because a similar campaign spearheaded by Christians, the Jubilee campaign, achieved incredible success in the last years of the 1990s. The crippling debt of heavily indebted countries was slashed by the world's richest countries, partly as a result of Christians saying, "It's time to take this burden off the backs of the poorest countries!".

Now groups such as the World Evangelical Fellowship, TEAR Australia, World Vision, Australian Baptist World Aid, and many other organisations are mounting a huge worldwide campaign to reduce world poverty by the year 2015. It's inspired by Micah 6:8, which calls us to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

The Micah Challenge builds on the amazing fact that in the year 2000 every single nation in the United Nations committed itself to a set of eight goals to halve global poverty by

2015. They're called the Millennium Development Goals. Each one has specific objectives, so that we will know if the goals have been met.

The eight goals are these:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and **hunger**
2. Achieve universal **primary education**
3. Promote gender equality and **empower women**
4. Reduce **child mortality**
5. Improve **maternal health**
6. **Combat HIV/AIDS**, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental **sustainability**
8. Develop a Global Partnership for **Development**

What the Micah Challenge wants to do is put legs onto these goals by pushing governments to take them seriously. The Micah Challenge is pitching to the Christian constituency, and a parallel campaign, called the Fair Share Campaign, is being supported by the wider Australian aid and development community.

The Micah Challenge is in its early stages — its international launch takes place on 17 October — and you can become part of it by signing the Micah Call. I've put the Call on the front of the Messenger, and if you agree with it, I urge you to sign the Call, which I've put on the table here, straight after the service.

I realise that the issues are huge, but just like the Jubilee Campaign, here's a chance for ordinary people like you and me to put democratic pressure on our government to be active in reducing world poverty. What can one person do? Very little. But what can millions do? An incredible amount.

Of course there are many other ways we can bring Good News to the poor. Jesus calls us to welcome the poor into our lives, to worship God by seeking justice, to be peacemakers and so on. But to vote in the Australian election according to each party's commitment to justice, and to sign the Micah Challenge are two small ways we can respond to Social Justice Sunday and to Jesus' story of the six rich brothers, whose great sin was to live in wealth and ignore the poor outside their gates.

*Ross Langmead, 24-9-04*