

# **SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER<sup>1</sup>**

## **The First Sunday after Trinity**

**The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate**

### **Lessons:<sup>2</sup>**

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the seventeenth Verse of the twenty-first Chapter of the Book of Job.<sup>3</sup>

“ How oft is the candle of the wicked put out! and how oft cometh their destruction upon them! God distributeth sorrows in his anger. They are as stubble before the wind, and as chaff that the storm carrieth away. God layeth up his iniquity for his children: he rewardeth him, and he shall know it. His eyes shall see his destruction, and he shall drink of the wrath of the Almighty. For what pleasure hath he in his house after him, when the number of his months is cut off in the midst? Shall any teach God knowledge? seeing he judgeth those that are high. One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet. His breasts are full of milk, and his bones are moistened with marrow. And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure. They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them. Behold, I know your thoughts, and the devices which ye wrongfully imagine against me. For ye say, Where is the house of the prince? and where are the dwelling places of the wicked? Have ye not asked them that go by the way? and do ye not know their tokens, That the wicked is reserved to the day of destruction? they shall be brought forth to the day of wrath. Who shall declare his way to his face? and who shall repay him what he hath done? Yet shall he be brought to the grave, and shall remain in the tomb. The clods of the valley shall be sweet unto him, and every man shall draw after him, as there are innumerable before him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the nineteenth Verse of the sixteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.<sup>4</sup>

“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith [SETH] unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.”<sup>5</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### **Homily:**

What kind of chasm separates souls in torment from souls in blessed rest and comfort? The Gospel says it is a great chasm. Yet it is not so great that people

cannot see each other and converse across it. Like all barriers, this chasm keeps people in as well as keeping people out. It separates people who are close to each other in every respect except one. They are not able to reach out to each other or share resources with each other.

The interesting thing about this great chasm is that it is man-made. The rich man himself created the barrier that separates him from the beggar. He created it in this world.

In the story, the beggar is given the name “Lazarus”, which means “Helped by God”. The rich man is not dignified with a name in the story, but he is traditionally called “Dives” [**DEE-vaze**], which is Latin for “rich”.

In life, Lazarus used to sit at the gate of the rich man’s property and scavenge the garbage for scraps of food. Dives [**DEE-vaze**] knew him by name, but never invited him in for a proper meal or anything else. These men were simply not of the same economic class or social status and could not be expected to associate with each other, much less share the wealth of the world.

So even though Dives [**DEE-vaze**] and Lazarus lived near each other physically, they were separated by an invisible chasm. They could see each other and talk to each other but could not interact with each other. And the chasm that separated them in this world is the same one that separates them in the next world.

In the latter case, of course, it is Lazarus who had the resources that Dives [**DEE-vaze**] wanted to share. This is one of the famous Gospel reversals that we read about in the New Testament. Such reversals appear in the Old Testament as well and also in many of the rabbinical writings, but we are familiar with them in such passages as: “The first shall be last and the last shall be first”, “The meek shall inherit the earth”, “Tax collectors and prostitutes go into the Kingdom of God before you”, and the oft-repeated phrase from the *Magnificat*, “He has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek.”

God is always on the side of the poor and the weak, and whoever separates himself from them, separates himself from God. That is one lesson that Dives [DEE-vaze] learned when it was too late to do anything about it.

The other lesson that Dives [DEE-vaze] learned is that, in the world to come, the choices we have made in this life are ratified, confirmed, and made permanent. So when Dives [DEE-vaze] calls out for Abraham to send Lazarus on an errand of mercy, Abraham replies in the words of the text: “[B]etween us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.” As C. S. Lewis says, the ultimate words of judgment that God pronounces are these, “Thy will be done.”

It seems ironic that the Kingdom of God has boundaries. God has no boundaries, and His kingdom should not have any either. But when He decided to create human beings, God made a bold and risky decision. He decided to endow us with free will. He wanted us to love Him freely as He loves us and not be compelled by some kind of inherent programming that would leave us no choice. It is His desire that all creatures should be included in His kingdom of fellowship and peace, but He left us with the option to exclude ourselves if we so choose.

There are certain behaviors and certain attitudes that are excluded from the Kingdom of God. The Bible contains a number of lists of such attitudes and behaviors, and by listing them God indicates His desire to purge us of them and to make us fit to live in His kingdom. But when people insist on holding onto those attitudes and behaviors, which we call sins, God honors those choices.

So here we have a man who built a wall around himself and a few friends whom he considered to be his equals. He refused to consider himself to be part of a larger community that might include people like Lazarus. So he isolated himself from the poor man, and in the process isolated himself from God. The result was that the chasm that he himself erected became permanent.

But even when he realized what had happened, Dives [DEE-vaze] still refused to expand the circle of people he cared about. “I beg you, father,” he says, “to send him [that is Lazarus, whom he considers to be some kind of servant] to

my father's house. For I have five brothers, that he may warn them lest they also come to this place of torment.”

Now isn't that wonderful? The man is concerned about his family. Everybody else can go to Hell, just so his brothers are saved. He doesn't care about the nation of Israel. He certainly doesn't care about the Gentile world. He still does not see what is plainly before him, namely, that it is this very willingness, to restrict the range of people with whom he is willing to be involved, that has cut him off from God in the first place.

Abraham's response is that if the man's brothers will not heed Moses and the prophets, they will not believe even if one should rise from the dead. Ironically, a man named Lazarus did, in fact, rise from the dead at the command of Jesus, and still the elite of Israel did not believe.

Dives [**DEE-vaze**] placed himself at the center of his own little universe and admitted only those who he thought could contribute to his enjoyment of life in this world. He is in torment precisely because in so doing he has cut himself off from the company of the God who has a special concern for the poor.

Now I ask you, do you do the same thing? Do you engage in selective evangelism? I don't want to invite this person to church because I don't think he would fit in. I'm not going to talk about Jesus with that person because he is Jewish or Muslim or something else and might be offended. We set boundaries by choosing those with whom we will share the Gospel and those with whom we will not.

We are selective about our friends. We don't want to associate with people who are obnoxious. We don't want to be friends with people whose customs are different and hard to understand. We certainly don't want to be friends with people who wish us harm, even though the Gospel tells us to love our enemies. And we don't want to be friends with people who challenge our opinions or who might make demands on us. Unfortunately, that includes God, because God is always challenging our opinions and making demands on us. We seem to realize that a closer relationship with God would require extensive changes in the way we live.

## Conclusion:

So we build fences. We dig chasms, we establish boundaries. And God allows us to do that. The problem is that these boundaries work both ways, and by fortifying them we exclude ourselves from the Kingdom of God.

But Dives [**DEE-vaze**] has one thing right. He recognizes that it is not too late for his brothers. And it is not too late for us. There is still time to change our ways and bridge those chasms before we die and the boundaries we have erected become permanent and God says to us, “Thy will be done.”

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church  
Charlottesville, Virginia

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<sup>1</sup> “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>2</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>3</sup> Job 21:17-33 (KJV).

<sup>4</sup> St. Luke 16:19-end (KJV).

<sup>5</sup> St. Luke 16:26 (RSV).