

**Unless you become like a child you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven, said Jesus. But unless you grow up and behave like an adult you won't make any progress in it. "Grow up into the full stature of Christ", says Paul.**

What would make your life perfect? What magical changes could be made to re-arrange the world to your satisfaction. Personally, I wish that Canadian bakers could make bread as deliciously as French bakers do. I wish the government would look after homeless people better. I would like my children would all move to Toronto, marry quickly and happily and produce grand children for me to play with. There are other things too, but those are the main ones for now.

Think about what you might wish for.

What I notice in my list is that it is other people who have to do things to make my life perfect!

There is something about this kind of wishing which itches in me when I read this parable of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man and the beggar. There is something in this parable for me. It is in the conversation Dives, the rich man, has with father Abraham.

"Father Abraham, I am in agony here. Have Lazarus come and dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue." And then "Send Lazarus to my father's house to warn my brothers." "Have Lazarus do this, send Lazarus to do that..." "I want," says the rich man, "Someone else to do things to make me happier." Hmmm.

Does the rich man go to torment just to balance out pleasure and pain, like the poor man being in heaven? If all the seats in hell are reserved for the rich we are all in deep trouble, because the poorest of us here live richer than a Middle Eastern crippled beggar.

I don't think this is about riches. I think this is about responsibility. It is about *taking* responsibility.

Dives has had it all, all his life. Safety, comfort, an unquestioned supply of food, servants, a big family around him, education, a nice house and the unquestioned privilege of being well-off.

Lazarus was born poor, malnourished in childhood, uneducated, infected and ill without access to medical help, abandoned by family, his best hope, as death draws daily nearer, was the charity of the local wealthy people. In the dirty road outside the family compound gate he has set up his mat and bowl.

Have you ever watched a beggar? A beggar scans the faces of those passing by, hoping to make eye contact, hoping to form that tiny moment of human-to-human connection.

Have you ever watched the faces of those who pass a beggar? They seem not to see her or him. No eye contact.

Yet Dives knows the beggar's name. You know, I recognise the guy who sell pencils on Queen Street. I recognize the man living in a tent on his bicycle, and the Rasta who plays good guitar outside the LCBO. Likewise Dives knew who was always sitting outside his house, always looking hopeful, when he was rushing off somewhere.

The story Jesus tells implies that Dives never gave Lazarus anything. He didn't get him a doctor's appointment, or make sure breakfast left-overs got delivered to him. He didn't stop each afternoon to chat. In fact Dives is incapable of communicating with him at all. Dives sees Father Abraham as an equal to chat with, but cannot put one sentence together to address the beggar man. Actually he is quite comfortable giving Father Abraham instructions regarding what Abraham should have Lazarus do for him.

For me this is the part of the story that has teeth.

It bites into me and triggers a feeling of discomfort. I squirm. I feel too much like Dives, and I don't like where this story puts me next.

I think that is why we call the Bible Holy Scripture. We call it the living Word of God. We say that the Spirit speaks to us through the Bible, moving like a sharp two-edged sword. Stories like this one of the beggar and the wealthy man matter. You shouldn't just read them like a novel. You need to soak into them, ponder them and feel where they touch you.

Scripture can comfort you and heal you. It can challenge and change you. The words, stories and images can get inside you. They should!

It happens when you read "in the Spirit", as they say, when you make room for God's Spirit to use Holy Scripture to move your heart and mind.

So it is the rich man's distance from the beggar that speaks to me.

It is my desire that other people should take up the work of making my life better. Bakers, Social Services, my children, other drivers on the road, Barack Obama to name but a few.

I think the problem with Dives is that he is not grown up. He believes that it is up to other people to make him happy. His Mum and his Dad, his servants, and the school he went to all worked to give him things and to keep him happy. Food appears but I doubt he could fry an egg. Clean clothes are laid out but I doubt he could sew on a button.

But being a grown-up is about looking after someone else. It is about making yourself responsible for your self, first, and then for others next. Children make a mess and grown-ups clean up.

A grown-up looks around and says, "How can I help?" A real grown-up helps the helpless, the unattractive, and even the hopeless. This, after all, is a description of Jesus, who came into the world to save sinners. Jesus, who gave up his life for us, in our stupid sinfulness, and not just us, but the stupid sinners of the whole world. (to paraphrase St John)

Growing into the full stature of Christ.

I am so far from being Christ-like, and so it is Dives, the Man-Boy of the story, who catches me, and that the Spirit of God points me to. The spirit says to me, "Who is your Lazarus?"

Part of my growing up into Christ is to answer that question. Part of my coming to the fullness of Christ is acknowledging how far away from fullness I am. And part of it is knowing that grown-ups undertake their own inner work of growing up more. No one else saves us. We each "work out our own salvation in fear and trembling" as Paul says.

The story ends chillingly. The life we live has consequences. They cannot be undone by getting someone else to get us out of our own mess. We have to pay attention, take notice and become adults in the kingdom of heaven here on earth. And, I think, for very faltering step forwards you make, God's angels of Grace, drop-kick you forward a hundred yards down the pitch to the goal posts of eternal life.

Ephesians 4;13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Pillippians 2;12 but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;