

Pentecost 16 / September 25, 2022

Luke 16:31

“He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead’.”

Listen to Moses and the Prophets

There is nothing more powerful or effective than God’s word. In the creation account of Genesis chapter one, all things come into being immediately and completely with the speaking of God’s word. When Jesus spoke, seas calmed and storms ceased. When Jesus called, life returned to the dead and their bodies rose. No one and nothing can resist God’s voice when He speaks in the absolute power of His word. However, when God calls through the gospel, people can resist His word. On the day of Pentecost, God called through Peter and more than three thousand believed in Christ their Saviour and were baptized into His name. The power of the Holy Spirit to create faith through the word was on display. As the Lord said through Isaiah, “The word that goes forth from my mouth will not return to me empty.”

His word did not return empty, three thousand believed, but nevertheless thousands remained in unbelief. Weeks later the evangelist Stephen spoke God’s word to another large gathering. Same word, but a different result. Instead of faith, those who heard responded with murderous violence. As Stephen said, like their ancestors they resisted the Holy Spirit. When God calls through the gospel His words can be resisted. Once called to life, the dead can choose to return to their graves. But when God’s word is combined with faith on the part of those who hear and when those who hear abide in God’s word, the result is eternal life. John wrote of his gospel and of all scripture saying: “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, that believing you may have life in His name.” We listen to the Moses, the Prophets, the apostles and evangelists, because they proclaim Jesus, in whose name we have life.

Our text is a conversation between Father Abraham and a man in hades. The man in hades seeks relief from his suffering, but there is no relief from suffering in hades. The man asks Abraham to send a messenger from the dead, Lazarus who reclines in the bosom of Abraham, to warn his brothers, so they do not also come to this place. A messenger will not be sent from the dead. A message has already been given to the living, the living word of God spoken by Moses and the prophets. The man in hades protests saying that’s not enough. He says that they will certainly believe, if some returns from the dead. Abraham replies that “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” There are many interesting details in the parable, such as the conversation between someone in paradise with someone in hades. But the most important aspect of the parable is the necessity of hearing the word of God and allowing the Holy Spirit to form and inform our faith through it.

There are three people are in the narrative. One is unnamed. He is simply described as a rich man “who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” The other two are identified by name as Lazarus and Abraham. Abraham is significant, because he is associated with faith in God’s word. In Genesis it says, “Abraham believed God and God reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Lazarus is a poor man covered with sores. He lay at the rich man’s gate. He was ignored by everyone except for the local dogs, who gave him some creaturely comfort by licking his sores. Some bible commentators say this was an indignity and added humiliation, but if you have a dog for a pet, you know better.

Both men die. The rich man goes to hades and Lazarus goes to Abraham’s side. We are not told directly the reason each goes to their respective place. We may surmise that the rich man went to hades because he thought only of himself, used his riches for his own pleasure and lived without a thought for people like Lazarus, who hoped for a scrap from his table. It is true that his actions and inaction showed much lacking in his moral integrity. He certainly didn’t do anything to deserve to go to heaven and he did much to show he earned a place in hades.

There was much the rich man could have done with his material resources that would have benefited people like Lazarus and the wider community. But if salvation is based on doing things that benefit others, the only ones in the parable who did anything that deserved a reward were the dogs. Lazarus suffered, but he didn’t do anything to benefit others either. We earn a place in hades by the sins we commit and by the good that we omit, but no one earns a place in heaven. Heaven is the gift of God, given as a gift of grace for the sake of Jesus. Grace is God’s gift of forgiveness, earned by Jesus through His life, suffering and death on the cross. Grace is given through the word and received through faith, by those who believe. Lazarus had no works of which to boast. He had nothing

but God's grace promised in the scriptures, received through faith. As Paul wrote in the letter to the Ephesians, "It is by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Unlike the rich man in the story, Jesus used His riches to benefit us all. Jesus is the rich man who became poor for our sakes, so that by His poverty we might become rich in the grace of God received through faith.

We may see the parable in terms of riches and poverty, but those are incidental to the point. The point is that we are saved by grace received through faith and that faith comes through the word of God. The man in hades wants Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers lest they also come to this place. Abraham tells the man, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." If people will not listen to the words of the living God who called all things into being and who sustains all things in being by His almighty word, then a lesser sign such as the return of the dead will have no effect either. If people don't want to believe the word, they will always find a way to discard a sign, no matter how wonderful.

Jesus raised another Lazarus from the dead. It was a sign to show that He is the resurrection and the life and that whoever believes in Him will live even though He dies. Many people saw the sign. So many people saw the sign that the religious authorities didn't every try to deny Jesus had done it. The chief priests didn't doubt the sign. They knew Jesus had power to do miracles. Regardless, they still refused to believe the words He spoke. Their solution was to not to reassess their belief system, but rather to kill both Lazarus and Jesus. If we won't believe the word, we won't believe the sign either. Signs support the word, but faith comes through the word.

Lazarus believed the words of Moses and the prophets, otherwise he wouldn't have rested at Abraham's side. What sign did Lazarus have? He had nothing except for God's word to sustain him in his suffering. Apart from the dogs that licked his sores, he received precious little creaturely comfort. If anyone should have disbelieved the kindness of God based on his life experience, it was Lazarus. He received bad things. If anyone should have believed the kindness of God based on his life experience, it was the rich man. He received the best things. But as it turned out, the rich man had no faith and Lazarus believed.

Riches, poverty and life situation are incidental to the story and to our lives. Whether we are rich or poor in the things of the world, the most important thing is faith and faith comes through hearing the word of God. There is nothing more important than hearing God's word. We can't make ourselves believe. Faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit working through the word. However, we can put ourselves in a position where faith becomes possible, by hearing the word. This is the most important thing we can do, because through the hearing of the word the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to create, nourish and sustain faith in Christ our Saviour. We cannot believe on the basis of our own reason and strength, which is why we must abide in the word. Jesus blessed Mary the sister of Martha earlier in our gospel readings, because she sat at His feet and listened to His words. All who sit at Jesus' feet and hear His words are blessed. As St. Paul said in the letter to the Romans, "faith comes through hearing, and hearing comes through the word of Christ." Everyone who hears the word of Christ and calls on His name will be saved!

God in His mercy, bless us with ears to hear His word, hearts to believe His word and voices to speak His word, so others may hear and believe. In Jesus' Name.