

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 29th September 2019

Luke 16: 19 – 31; 1 Tim 6: 6 – 19; Amos 6: 1a, 4 - 7

In New York City there are 58,000 elevators – we would call them lifts on this side of the Atlantic. These lifts make over eleven billion trips every year. I learned this from an article I read in a newspaper. The writer, a columnist called Emma Brockes who lives in New York, was describing her elevator-phobia. She, and most of her friends – perhaps most New York City residents – experience a slight surge in anxiety whenever they take one of those eleven billion annual lift rides, which in New York is a daily occurrence. She describes it as a feeling akin to the anxiety nearly everyone experiences during a plane's take-off, landing or turbulence – the suspicion that the metal tube we are riding in is defying the laws of nature.

Ms Brookes phobia is irrational of course. Although lifts break down, and although it is not inconceivable that in New York you might spend some time stuck in one if you live there long enough, the chances of a catastrophic accident in which you might die is vanishingly small; so small that for all intents and purposes there is nothing to worry about. But, Ms Brookes, her friends and others do worry – if only briefly – because, after all, accidents do happen; you can read about them daily in the New York Post.

If you are in a lift, and you want to reduce your chances of becoming a story in the Post, or any other newspaper, one way to do so is to wait until the lift has stopped moving before you enter or leave it. Then, when you do, skip slightly over the gap between the elevator and the floor or vice-versa. You see, it is not uncommon for elevators to drop a little bit when they reach a floor, and when they do, it is not unheard of for people to fall into the gap and be crushed between the lift shaft and the lift itself.

The most dangerous part of a lift is not the lift itself, nor the floor you might be standing on while waiting for the lift, it is the gap in between the lift and the floor that you have to be aware of; always mind the gap.

If this story has made you feel a little bit less secure, or more anxious about your next ride in a lift, that is my intention, because it is that feeling of anxiety that Jesus wants us to feel when we hear his story about another gap that too often too many people don't mind, in the tale of the rich man and Lazarus that we read today.

Matters of money and wealth are persistent concerns for Jesus in the Gospels, and in the Gospel of Luke in particular. It isn't so much wealth itself that is problematic, after all wealth has the capacity to improve lives greatly, it is more what people do with it and who doesn't have it, that concerns Jesus. In the story we read there is, in Abraham's words, "a great chasm" between the rich man and Lazarus. And because the rich man didn't mind the gap between him and Lazarus when they were both alive, when they are both dead and their positions are reversed, the rich man is fated to suffer for eternity.

The rich man isn't the only person who cares about his place in the world, we are all much concerned with our place in the world. We care greatly about where we live - in what place. We care greatly about how much we earn or how wealthy we are - our economic place in the world. We care greatly about our seniority at work - our place in the hierarchy. We care greatly about our schooling and our university - our places of education, knowledge and opportunity. We care greatly about the people we like to be around, those who are like us and who like to be around us - our social place in the world. We care greatly about our literal place in the environmental world: we like some summer sun and our beautiful garden.

Knowing our place in the world, in all sorts of ways, helps us to know where we are, how we should live, and who we should live with. Knowing our place, and the place of others, in the world helps us to orientate ourselves, to understand the world around us, and to make sense of who we are, our identity.

In the parable we read, the rich man has a place (he lives within the gate) and he has a sense of identity (he dresses in purple and the finest linen, and he feasts). Lazarus too has a place (he sits at the gate), and he too has a sense of identity (he is dressed in sores and has to beg for scraps).

Between these two places there is clearly a chasm, and it is this chasm that the parable wants to warn us about. But, it is not the chasm that we think it is. It is not a chasm between two places. We discover this in the second half of the parable when the rich man and Lazarus' places are reversed, and another chasm opens up between them. Then, the rich man calls out for help, but he doesn't protest that he is in the wrong place, instead he asks that Lazarus might cross the chasm and give him some relief; the chasm doesn't exist between two places, but between two people.

Whenever we have an attachment to a sense of place there is always a gap that needs minding between the place we are in and the place others are in. The more we identify ourselves with the place we are in: where we live; how much we earn; where we are on the ladder of success; where we were educated, then the larger the gap between us and those who are not in that place. And the fewer too will be the opportunities we have of crossing that gap, which the more we stay in the place we are in, the more likely the gap is to grow larger and larger until it has become a chasm.

At the end of the parable the rich man asks Abraham to warn his brothers so that, as he says, "they too may not come to this *place* of torment." Life, the rich man realises, is not about our relationship with our place in the world, but about our relationship with other people in the world.

Too late, says Abraham, why would your brothers pay heed, they are already aware of the issue, but they are not doing anything about it; there's nothing that can change their minds. This parable was written a long time ago, but like the brothers of the rich man, we too haven't learned its lesson.

Much research has been done on the relationship between inequality in countries and the well-being of people who live in those countries. It is only now that we are beginning to realise that societies become increasingly weaker when inequalities of wealth and income becomes increasingly larger. We all live in the same place, the same country, but it is the chasm of wealth between us that causes harm.

In both America and the United Kingdom the most determinative indicator of how you vote is whether or not you went to university. For example, in 2016 those who did not go to university were much more likely to have voted Leave in the UK and for Donald Trump in the USA. Those who did go to university were much more likely in 2016 to have voted Remain in the UK, and for Hillary Clinton in the USA.

Only now are we realising that inequalities in education and opportunity, even in democracies, can produce brittle and divided communities. We all live in the same place, the same country, but it is the chasm of education between us that causes harm.

The effects of large gaps, chasms, in our society whether it be in income, or housing, or education, or opportunity cripple individuals – their health, their sense of wellbeing, their potential, and they cripple societies as a whole.

That is true even of our relationship to the world around us. The bigger the gap between the rate of change in the climate and what we are doing about it, the more dangerous the planet itself will become to millions who live on it, and the more fragile will become our continued prosperity and freedoms.

As I spoke about a few weeks ago, the Old Covenant brought God and his people into a relationship with a piece of land, a place. The New Covenant brings God and his people into a relationship to other people. The more we build better and more equal, relationships with other people the healthier and happier our lives, our societies, our workplaces, our churches, our communities, our countries, and our world will become. The more we identify with and love other people in the world, instead of our place in the world, the more likely are we all to experience a greater sense of well-being.

The American poet Robert Frost wrote a poem called Mending Wall. In it he describes the wall that separates his land, his place, from his neighbours'. But, every year that wall needs repaired because of the gaps that appear in it. He writes,

... the gaps ...

No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.

Every spring he and his neighbour walk along the line of the wall together, one on one side, the other on the other, repairing it. As they only have apple trees on their land, and not cows for example, Robert Frost wonders why they keep doing this. His neighbour answers, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

But, wonders Frost, 'Why do they make good neighbours? ... Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling-in or walling-out, And to whom I was like to give offence.'

The good news in our parable this morning is not that God came down from heaven, another place, to be with us on earth, it is that he crossed a chasm to become one of us, to build a relationship with us. God is not concerned with our place in the world relative to people in other places, he is concerned with our relationships in this world with other people wherever they are.

We will be judged not on the quality of the places we have built within which we live, but on the quality of the relationship we have built with those we live alongside. As embodied people, we will always live somewhere, in some place, but let us make sure the gaps between those places are so small that they need only a little skip to cross, not so big that they become an unbridgeable chasm.