The parable of the rich man and the sick beggar at his gate

Season of Creation 4 – Pent + 16 – Jrm 32 1-3a, 6-15, Ps 91 1-6 14-16, 1 Tim 6 6-19, Lk 16 19-31

Children – Jeremiah 32 I-3a, 6-I 5 – You remember last week we thought how sad it was for Jeremiah that he always had such bad news to tell people? Mostly he did have bad news to tell, because his people were doing all sorts of things they shouldn't – like being selfish and mean to poor people and sick people. God asked Jeremiah and lots of other prophets to warn people that if they kept on behaving like that, then the king of Babylon would come and take over their land, and carry them all off into exile where they'll all be slaves. Poor old Jeremiah! Always full of bad news. But today is different!

The king of Babylon will do what Jeremiah said; he will carry everyone off into slavery. But today, we'll hear how Jeremiah does something to show everyone that there's still hope. God gives Jeremiah a sign that their exile won't last for ever. God tells him that his cousin Hanamel will visit him soon and offer to sell him some land. Normally with a foreign army surrounding you and about to cart you off into exile, the last thing you'd think of would be buying land. But God tells Jeremiah to do just that, and to seal the purchase documents safely in clay jars, ready to be opened again when they come back from Babylon. So today, Jeremiah gives the people a sign that there is hope. And that's something *we* should always do; no matter how worried we might be – no matter what. As God's people, we always have hope, and that's something we should share with everybody.

Sermon – Luke 16.19-31 – The parable of the rich man and the

sick beggar at his gate.

A few weeks ago, I quoted a scientist who'd once believed that thirty years of good science and innovation would help get us through the threat of climate change – that the problems were physical and chemical issues. But now he says he's realised the real climate change problems are people's greed, selfishness and apathy – things that he as a scientist is not equipped to address. He says we need a spiritual and cultural transformation to make the necessary changes. That's something people in the Church have known for a long time. And this Season of Creation is a call to action.

The first Letter to Timothy today speaks to us from that spiritual perspective. We read, *Those who want to be rich…are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.* [6.9] And we rich people are exhorted … *to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share* – [so as to] *take hold of life that really is life.* [6.18]

This exhortation prepares us for hearing the parable of Lazarus and the greedy, selfish, rich man who was so apathetic to the plight of the poor man at his gate.

Jesus tells this parable to the religious elite – who are named here as 'lovers of money' – people who believe their wealth is a sign of God's blessing to them – not a sign that God wants them to be *rich in good works, generous, and ready to share*. In this parable, Jesus confronts them with a picture of a rich man who dresses like royalty; a wealthy glutton who *feasts sumptuously every day* while at his very gate, poor, hungry Lazarus lies daily in hope of the best thing a stray dog might expect.

It's a one-on-one picture of the disparity that exists on a national scale within this country, and on a world scale between countries like ours and the majority world. Sometimes,

we're confronted by this personally; and we're directly challenged to do something about it. When I was a child, we lived in Thailand, and for some of that time, in a hotel. It had a swimming pool set in a lush garden with high walls surrounding it. We had lots of fun there. But only later when someone showed us a photo they'd taken of us from their upstairs balcony, I saw that outside the wall, there was a rubbish-strewn dustbowl, where poor families lived in shanties propped against the other side of that wall. Extreme wealth and privilege unconsciously cheek by jowl with utter destitution, and until that photo was developed, we had absolutely no idea.

The rich glutton in the parable wasn't unconscious of poor Lazarus, slumped in his gateway, covered in sores and desperate for a morsel of food. He knew him; we know this because after they've both died, he cries out, *Father Abraham… send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue*. [16.24] *Send Lazarus*! He even knew his *name*; so his neglect and selfishness were habitual and personal. And even in Hades, he still only thinks of Lazarus as an errand boy for his own comfort. Michael Trainor, in his commentary, names this style of injustice as the behaviour of an Earth-enemy. Abuse of wealth and exploitation of the poor is directly linked to the attitude of the wealthy to Earth's gifts. And on a global scale, that's landed us where we are; 100 million displaced persons, species disappearing and a planet in peril. By contrast, Jesus' dress and eating practice identify him as Earth's child, and revealer of God's all-embracing delight in creation.

We are followers of Jesus. His life choices and his teachings are our example. I believe I once saw him at work, showing what's possible, on another journey. Vicky and I were on a train journey through Eastern Europe. We sat opposite an elderly couple. The wife pulled out a rye loaf and some butter for their lunch. Our train pulled into a siding, and suddenly

there were lots of grubby, poorly-dressed children banging on the window and pointing at their hungry mouths. We threw them some of our barley sugar. But the old lady solemnly buttered the end of her rye loaf, cut it off – a lovely thick slab – and passed it out of the window down to the children. They, equally solemnly, showed her their deep gratitude. She knew them; she knew what they needed. She, the image of Jesus, Earth's child, just as those children are.

I remembered then a story of communion in a poor country where the little children cried when they weren't given communion like the adults – they hadn't been through first communion yet. But they cried not because they felt excluded, but because they were so hungry that even that tiny morsel would have meant the world to them.

We can make a difference; we can make hope possible. Amen