

**Brother Can You Spare A Dime?**  
**26<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year C**  
**Luke 16: 19-31**  
**26 September 2010**

Although we have a welfare state, and although standards of living in New Zealand are at the highest in our history, it's interesting how begging has developed as a custom in recent times. Beggars approach the clergy more than most. The conclusions I have come to about these suppliants are as follows.

Some are seasoned professionals telling ingenious stories well crafted to extract money from the compassionate. For them begging is a way of adding some disposable income to their other regular sources. I almost never give to this group, but feel good humoured in their company since we are both professionals in our own different ways. Occasionally I have made a contribution because of the sheer breath taking audacity and novelistic skills of their hard luck stories. Artistic creativity should be rewarded I feel.

Others are opportunistic cadgers who have spent their money on a good time in town and are looking for a top up, or who are feckless suburban budgeters who expect others to routinely bail them out. These folk receive short shrift from me.

There are another smaller group who have genuinely fallen off the world, and who come looking for help in their extremity. The marks of genuineness about them are the way in which they tell fewer lies than the others, and the fact that they often ask for practical help rather than money. These are the folk who in my opinion are worth taking some trouble over.

One of the people who I have most admired for the practical and Christian approach he took to approaches from beggars is our Archbishop David Moxon. In his time at Oxford as a theology student he often had to deal with this situation as beggars cluster around the gullible and idealistic undergraduates, and of course there is more deeply entrenched poverty in English society. "Yes, I will get you a meal – come with me now and I will buy it for you." "Yes, I will give you what it takes to travel to your dying relative – come with me to the bus station now, and I will buy you the ticket." Often of course beggars would peel off at this point. But David's practical and discerning generosity was prepared to help those who genuinely needed it, rather than just assisting people to drink themselves to death.

The most amusing beggars I have ever encountered were in the city of San Francisco. One such had cleaned out a municipal rubbish bin on

the waterfront, had taken up residence in it for the afternoon, and had hung out his begging bowl and sign, which read – “White trash.”

In Elizabethan and high medieval England beggars were everywhere. In a society with few social safety nets the coping and the well off were acutely aware that there but for the grace of God went they. And in a society deeply influenced by the Christian faith people had taken on board the gospel teaching that Christ comes to us incognito behind the appearance of the poor, the ill, the mad, and the despairing. Refusing a beggar might mean that you had inadvertently turned Christ away. People were very keen to avoid putting themselves in that position, particularly as it was an age that thought a lot about the last judgement.

This is the other perspective that this morning’s Dives and Lazarus parable holds before us. While we are being hard headedly realistic and practical in our dealings with beggars, we would want to avoid taking things to the extreme of being hard hearted Hannah’s who ignore the needs of the poor. At the centre of the religion of the Old Testament is the promise that God would take from his people their hearts of stone and replace them with a heart of flesh, a heart of love. Such a loving heart is alive to the reality that what ever we have is on temporary loan from God, and that God is keenly interested in the kind of stewardship that we exercise over these gifts.

John Nolland gets to the heart of this morning’s gospel passage when he writes:

The parable suggests that there is a profound challenge to the social status quo to be found in the law and the prophets, and that there is a desperate need for the privileged to search out their stipulations and to act upon them. The gospel of the kingdom of God affirms and yet makes more radical the demands of the law and the prophets.

The key question before us this morning, whether we have a lot or a little or a middling amount, is – are we a blessing to those around us? Do we use our resources, our money, our time, and our ability to make things happen, in such a way as to bless those around us so that they give thanks to God that we are around in their lives? Are we a gracious and generous presence in the lives of those we know, helping in ways that are discrete and appropriate, doing good by stealth as it were?

It is easy to use money as a power and influence to lord it over people, so that our patronage raises up one and brings low another. We can fall into the trap of using money to bind people to us in nets of manipulation and obligation, in which a “you scratch my back and I scratch yours” dynamic sets in. Then people come to fear and resent us. In Japanese culture there is a keen sense of reciprocal obligations

in which help from on high can impose crushing demands. “Thank you for this gift, the obligation of which to return in a like manner will take years of effort,” is the literal translation of one such formulaic response to this kind of situation.

No, we need to be wise and thoughtful and pastorally imaginative if we are to be a blessing to others in the things of this world. So empathy and insight and subtlety are required of us so that we discern the poor man at our gate, and do what is best for them in a kind and effective manner.

John Wesley preached his powerful message of evangelical awakening to an unchurched audience who were either at the bottom of the heap, or on the lower rungs of the social ladder. His advice was to, “earn as much as you can, save as much as you can, and give away as much as you can.” He encouraged thrift and financial prudence, restrained life styles and generous philanthropy. It has been said that he thereby raised an entire generation and class up the social scale. And in the process made them to be often a source of blessing to those around them. In a heartless world of early industrialization and urban drift Methodists were often good news people to those around them.

That is our challenge too this morning in this place and this time.