

Trinity 1 (2024)

Christianity is a life-affirming religion!

The life to come . . . yes, absolutely!

Death for the Christian is not a full stop (a period), nor is it a question mark, but an exclamation point. “Because He lives, we shall live also!” Easter equals hope.

But life for the follower of Jesus does not have to wait for some future existence, indeed it should not. The days we are given in the present are gift and need to be received as such.

A wise man has said:

**“I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow-creature, let me do it now, let me not**

**defer or neglect it; /// for I shall not pass this way again.”**

Living out our faith in the present is a recurring theme in the season of the Church Year we begin today . . . the long “Sundays after Trinity’ season.

In the first half of the Church Year, the tapestry of God’s rescue operation for the human race is held up and displayed.

Key events in salvation history are revisited and re-affirmed, not the least being our Lord’s birth, death, resurrection, ascension, followed by the coming Holy Spirit with new power on God’s people at Pentecost.

Then on Trinity Sunday the full splendor of the triune Godhead is celebrated. “God in three persons, blessed Trinity!” we sing.

But what happens after that? ///

We focus on living out the Good News in the world.

Trinity-tide is about growth . . . growth in grace, growth in understanding, growth in service, growth in holiness, growth in witness. Thus, the color of our altar hangings throughout this 20-plus-week season is verdant green.

If living out our faith in the world is the theme, then there is no better place to begin than with today's Gospel which contains the parable of the Rich Man (often called Dives) and Lazarus.

Here are two men as different as chalk and cheese. One rich, the other poor. One fat and happy, the other emaciated and miserable. One who never had to ask anyone for anything (because he had it all); the other forced to beg.

One robust, the other covered with putrefying soars. One with many friends, the other with only canines for companions.

As different as they were, they did have something in common – their common mortality. Death, you see, is the great leveler. Lazarus died, and so did the Rich Man.

It is at this point the plot quickens. Following their respective deaths, there is a reversal of fortunes. Lazarus finds himself having it all, while the Rich Man finds himself begging . . . begging for a few drops of water.

In this parable we see illustrated what Mary had seen prior to Jesus' birth. In the Magnificat, she cries out:

**“He [God] hath put down the mighty  
form their seat: and hath exalted the humble  
and meek.**

**“He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.”**

The expectation was that when Israel’s true King – the Messiah –appeared, he would put all wrongs to rights.

He would usher in a “Jubilee”. In case you are not up on your “Jubilees” . . . according to Leviticus 25, after every seven cycles of seven years (49 years), the fiftieth year was to be a time of economic reset.

All prisoners and captives were to be set free, all debts were to be forgiven, and all property was to be returned to its original owners. If you had had to mortgage the family farm, you got it back.

It is uncertain if Jubilee was ever observed, but, regardless, it was a beautiful ideal. More

than that, it was one that pointed forward to the Messianic age.

By the time of Jesus, many had forgotten what God delights in: generosity, justice and kindness. A jubilee was sorely needed.

Like many in our day, people in Jesus' day were serving the God of mammon and living for self. In this parable, Jesus says a day of reckoning and reversal is coming.

Jesus' people were to be different. They were to live life in the present in view of the life that was to come. That principle still holds.

Before I go any further, I should probably put to rest the false notion that the Rich Man's sin, the sin that landed him in the flames, was that he was rich.

Not so, it is not a sin to be rich. The sin that brought him down to hell was his trust in those

things that were fleeting and temporal and his indifference to the needs of the man at his gate.

Paul in 1 Timothy 6:17,18, sums up the Christian doctrine of wealth when writes (I am quoting here from the RSV):

**“As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. <sup>18</sup> They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, <sup>19</sup> thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed.”**

By the same token, there is no virtue in poverty. Lazarus landed in Abraham’s bosom not because he was destitute but because of his trust and dependence on God. Faith was and is the victory.

Having crossed out these two possible misconceptions. Let me now return to what I said earlier: Those who check the “I believe” box are called to live out their faith in the world.

One way you go about doing this is by beginning with the person at your gate. In the case of the Rich Man the man at his gate was Lazarus.

Paul in Galatians 6:10 puts us on the right track when he says: **“As we have . . . opportunity, let us do good unto all *men*.”** Then he adds: **“especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”**

In other words, those nearest at hand. Paul is not opposed to helping everyone, but you have to begin somewhere.

The same applies to us. This past week I had to pick up someone up from the Fulton County Jail in Atlanta.



It was a sad place. As I was waiting for the man I was picking up, I saw a number of men being released, most of whom looked lost and helpless. One, a middle-aged black man, had a paperback Bible in his hand. I struck up a conversation with him and said, **“How are you doing.”**

He responded, **“Not very well. I have no one to call . . . no father, no mother, no one to reach out to.”**

It was enough to break your heart. I wanted to help, but there was nothing I could do other than offer some kind words.

I was there to pick up the man who had been placed at my gate, so I carried on with that.

What I am saying is that it is easy to get overwhelmed. There are so many needs out there. Where do you start?

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus tells us: the man outside your gate. After you have taken care of him, you can move further afield. But if you try to help everybody, you end up helping nobody.

Who's at your gate? Look around, take notice and begin there.

A second thing we should do after checking the "I believe" box is not to get discouraged over the unbelief of those to whom we witness. Let me explain.

Perhaps you have friends and family members you long to see come to Christian faith. You want them to have the joy and assurance that comes from knowing the Lord. You reach out to them. You do what you can to bring them into the fold of safety. But nothing happens. They say no.

Have you done something wrong? Have you not given them enough information? /// No, not necessarily.

Think about what happens in the parable we have before us this morning. The Rich Man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers of their coming fate. If someone rose from the dead they would believe, he reasons.

What is Abraham's response? /// No, they won't. And we see his words played out and found to be true when Jesus raised another Lazarus, Lazarus of Bethany.

Many believed that day, but a number did not let their coattails hit them before they were off to report what had happened to the religious leaders in Jerusalem who were even then plotting Jesus' death.

These had all the evidence. But seeing someone risen from the dead was not enough.

The application is clear. We are certainly to share our faith. We are to present clear evidence. We are to make the case for Christ as cogently and convincingly as we can.

But, when we have done this and there is a less-than-positive response, we mustn't think we have done something wrong. Instead of being discouraged, we must carry on and leave the rest to God. For one thing, not all seeds sprout at the same time. ///

In closing, what we do in the present counts. Let's seize the opportunities we are given for both service and witness . . . for, as we have already heard, *we shall not pass this way again.*