

A large, stylized red flame graphic is positioned in the upper right corner of the page. It consists of several jagged, pointed shapes that resemble fire, rendered in a solid red color against the textured, yellowish background.

DANGEROUS STORIES

**scripture from
the margins**

**Bible studies on the parables
from Church Action on Poverty**

Church Action on Poverty is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. We work in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions to poverty, locally, nationally and globally. Further information can be found at www.church-poverty.org.uk.

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INTRODUCTION

Scripture from the margins

The Bible shows us again and again that God is on the side of the people on the edges. In a thread that runs through all of scripture, God is concerned first and foremost with people who have been excluded from society by poverty, oppression and injustice. Laws like Jubilee in the Old Testament are designed to ensure that no one is left behind and exploited... The prophets stand up constantly against the rich and powerful who would oppress people in poverty... Mary sings of a God who has “brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly”... Jesus says “Blessed are you who are poor ... But woe to you who are rich.”

But too often, when we read scripture in our churches, we forget that perspective. We focus on other aspects of the story, or we become so familiar with the text that we don't notice the challenging things it has to say to us.

Jesus' parables are one of the best examples of this problem. When we read and think about the parables, we almost always look for allegorical, spiritual meanings. We work out which character represents God, and we reflect on what the story tells us about church growth, or our own faith journey.

But the parables are actually very earthly stories – and if we try to put ourselves in the place of their original audience, we discover very different messages in them.

Jesus used stories to connect with people. He used imagery that came straight from the lived experience of the people he was speaking to. When we hear talk of 'lost sheep' and vineyards, it is very easy for us to focus only on symbolic meanings about the afterlife, because those things are not part of our day-to-day life. But Jesus was speaking to crowds of mainly poor people in first-century Palestine. Many of his listeners would know exactly what it was like to lose a sheep, or to labour in a rich person's vineyard. Just as importantly, they were living under Roman occupation. As they listened to Jesus' stories, they would be thinking about their daily experience of oppression and their desire for liberation.

This series of five Bible studies is designed to help you read the parables with this in mind. You will find that they have a lot to say about our economic systems and how we relate to one another. They challenge us to get alongside the people who are on the margins of our own society – and to speak out for justice. They become subversive, dangerous stories.

About the Bible studies

Each of the studies is split into six sections:

- **Read** – the text of a parable, taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
- **Think** – information about the world of Jesus' original audience, and how their experiences would have affected their understanding of the parable.
- **Listen** – some suggestions of issues affecting people in the world today which relate to the theme of the parable.
- **Reflect** – some questions to help you think more deeply, and relate the parable to your own experience.
- **Act** – ideas for how you can apply the message of the parable in our world today, especially by working with Church Action on Poverty.
- **Pray** – a short prayer for you to use.

Using the studies in a group

The studies are designed so that they can be used in a house group or Bible study group, if you wish.

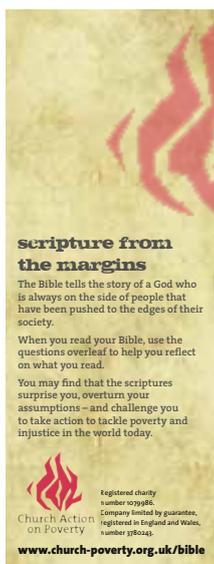
- Each study has enough material for a single 60–90-minute session. We suggest that you also have an initial session to discuss the background in this introduction, and agree what you all hope to get from the studies.
- You could use them at any time of year, but they make a good Lent course. Church Action on Poverty is encouraging churches to use the studies during Lent 2019, following on from church services on Church Action on Poverty Sunday (3 March, the last Sunday before Lent).
- It will be easiest if one person acts as facilitator for the group, reading through the studies and then drawing on the notes to prompt questions and steer the discussion.
- Each study is designed so that it can easily be printed or copied onto two double-sided sheets of A4 – so every member of your group can have their own copy.
- If you are using the studies in a group, we suggest that you discuss the questions in the ‘Reflect’ section immediately after reading the parable together. They will help people to start engaging actively with the passage, and discussing its meanings with one another.

Reading the rest of the Bible from the margins

At Church Action on Poverty, we want churches to think actively about the priority God places on poor and marginalised people – whenever they read the Bible. These studies are about the parables, but the same approach can uncover fresh ideas elsewhere in scripture too.

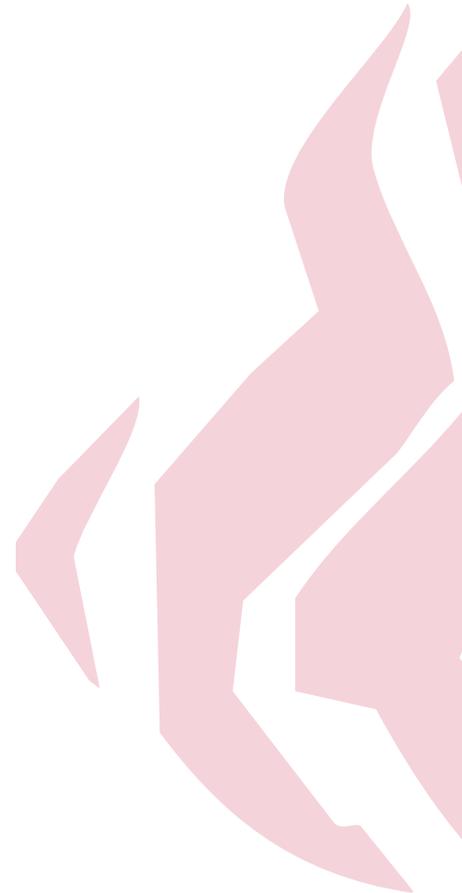
We have produced a bookmark for you to keep in your Bible, which includes 12 questions to ask about any passage of scripture. Use it help you consider what the message might have been for the original audience – and how it reflects God’s call to be on the side of marginalised people.

Download or order a ‘Scripture from the margins’ Bible bookmark at www.church-poverty.org.uk/bible



JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

A Bible study by Revd Chris Howson



Read: John 10:10–14 (New Revised Standard Version)

**The hired hand,
who is not
the shepherd
and does not own
the sheep, sees the
wolf coming and
leaves the sheep
and runs away –
and the wolf
snatches them
and scatters them**

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.¹⁴ I am the good shepherd.”

If you have time, you could read the whole of chapters 9 and 10 in John’s Gospel to get the full context of this story.

Think

John’s Gospel is the latest of all the four Gospels, possibly written about 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It uses complex and poetical theological language to speak to its readers. Unusually, there are no traditional parables of the kind typically found in other Gospels. Instead, John’s Gospel is full of ‘signs’ (such as turning water into wine) and imagery (the true vine, the Shepherd, etc). The writer may well be writing during a time of persecution of the early Church, both from the Roman Empire and from some Jewish leaders – and so parts of the Gospel may be seeking to strengthen readers’ faith during periods of hardship. This particular passage occurs during a confrontation with powerful religious and political leaders, who are arguing that Jesus is either possessed by the Devil or is simply a sinner, because he has healed a blind man on the Sabbath day. Jesus responds to his accusers with a story identifying himself as a compassionate shepherd, prepared to lay down his life for the sheep.

The original readers would have recognised this in the light of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, being prepared to lay down his life for the people of God. They would also have understood clearly who the other characters in the story would relate to. Jesus talks about “thieves and bandits”, and the listeners would have had no problem identifying those who steal from the people through corruption and extortion. The term “bandits” specifically refers to those who use violence to extort money from the people.

The scary imagery of the wolf would have made obvious sense to those living in rural communities, but it also has political and social overtones. In terms of Roman Imperialism, the occupier’s heartland is founded by two brothers, Romulus and Remus, sons of Mars the God of war, who were raised by wolves. The imagery of the wolf destroying the flock is particularly strong in this context. The hired hand seems a dig at those who led the Jewish people but colluded with the Roman occupiers during the time of Jesus. They clearly get paid to do their job, but have no real care for the people they are supposed to serve.



Wolves were associated with the Roman occupiers because of the story of Romulus and Remus

Listen

In our unequal present times, governed by what has been sometimes dubbed ‘the survival of the richest’, we can often feel encircled by wolves and predators who would rip us off and exploit us given the opportunity. Those on low incomes are often at the mercy of doorstep money-lenders, increasing the burden on the very poorest. In some communities, people can end up being sexually exploited as the only way to feed their families. Many of those who are seeking asylum and sanctuary have to entrust their very lives into the hands of mercenary people smugglers. The Church must acknowledge the world as it is and seek to protect the vulnerable, whilst building an alternative world based on God’s love, justice and mercy.

Kath from Stockton-on-Tees was swept into debt and depression by debts to high-cost lenders. Read her story at <http://blog.church-poverty.org.uk/2013/08/05/drowningindebt>.

Reflect

- Have you ever had to struggle to ‘keep the wolf from the door’? Have you lived through difficult times when people were determined to rip you off and keep you impoverished?
- Have you any experience of the ‘hired hands’, those who were supposed to protect and support you, but actually did little to help you when things got difficult?
- The people are clearly most at risk when they are scattered like sheep; are there ways of acting in solidarity with others who are vulnerable and helping folk stick together and help each other?
- Jesus is prepared to risk all to protect the vulnerable; are we able to act like Jesus today and take huge risks to defend the most vulnerable?

Like the 'hired hands'
Jesus spoke of,
the benefits system
which is supposed
to keep people afloat
is actually sweeping
them further
into poverty

Act

List the current activities that local faith communities are involved in to support vulnerable people in your local community. Which ones work best – and why? Spend some time at each activity and find out what the people and volunteers feel would most help each project. Ask those who use these projects if there are other needs people have that are not already being met. Invite your local councillors to visit any projects and hear first-hand what the problems that people face are.

Look at the bigger picture too. Problems with our benefits system, low pay and insecure work are leaving many people fearing the 'wolf at the door'. Like the 'hired hands' Jesus spoke of, the benefits system which is supposed to keep people afloat is actually sweeping them further into poverty.

You could speak out about these issues and call for change by joining the End Hunger UK campaign at www.endhungeruk.org.

Pray

I am encircled by wolves. I am fearful for my family, for my future, for my very life. Lord, you are the Good Shepherd. You know my name. You have died for me on the cross. Help me and protect me.

Teach our church how to be vulnerable with our neighbours. Stop us when our urge is to look away and turn from the hard things in life. Help us to risk everything for those being torn apart by poverty and violence. Help our church to be the Good Shepherd.

About the author



Revd Chris Howson is the Chaplain to the University of Sunderland, and an associate priest for Sunderland Minster. He works closely with sanctuary-seekers and those pushed to the edge by austerity politics. He is the author of *A Just Church: 21st Century Liberation Theology in Action*. He runs the 'Victor Jara Liberation Library' and helps organise the annual UK Liberation Theology Gathering.

THE LOST THINGS

A Bible study by Marie Pattison



**Read: Luke 15:1–10 (plus the rest of Luke 15 if desired)
(New Revised Standard Version)**

Which one of you, having 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸“Or what woman having 10 silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Think

Jesus tells these stories about people who have considerable wealth compared to the majority of those listening. Most of the people of Judea are living hand to mouth; taxes are harsh and many queue for a daily wage. Most do not have 100 sheep or 10 coins, or as much property as the father in the next parable.

Imagine those listening to Jesus. They do not have 100 sheep but they are familiar with the behaviour of sheep in a way most of us are not. Sheep are stupid, sheep wander. Most of them, if they had 100 sheep, would not leave them vulnerable to possible attack in order to chase one. But the kingdom of heaven runs on different mathematics to the kingdoms of earth.

The woman in the parable is a responsible person – she notices her coin is missing because she is counting them. Once she realises what she has lost, she seeks it and finds it. She claims responsibility for the coin: “the one that I had lost”.

These parables are traditionally interpreted as a loving God rejoicing over penitent sinners; and not about the economics of heaven and earth at all. But notice the lack of penitence in any of these stories. Sheep do not have a developed understanding of right and wrong, and pennies are inanimate objects. Neither are sorry. The son in the next story does not get a chance to express regret. They are all stories about noticing what has been lost by being watchful about it, and seeking to regain what is absent.

Are those who have much most likely to overlook things? People who have very little are experts in counting. They know how much money they have, how much food can be bought with it, how many days it has to last. A shepherd with 10 sheep notices a missing one before a shepherd with 100 sheep. Are these stories meant to suggest to those who are comfortable that the kingdom, the community is fractured if even one is lost?

Listen

When we speak about poverty we often speak in terms of numbers. Like the shepherd who only noticed his sheep was missing because he counted them, and the woman who counted her coins, it is important to notice and take stock.

Listen to the following statements:

“A child born in poverty can expect to live nine years less than one who is not.”

“One in six parents have gone hungry to feed their children.”

“Two thirds of children in poverty are living in households where at least one adult is in work”

“Life expectancy for those sleeping rough is 45 years.”

“4.5 million people in England and Wales are on zero-hours contracts or other insecure work.”

“Rough sleeping on Manchester’s streets has increased seven times since 2010.”

“1,332,952 three-day emergency food supplies were given to people in crisis in the past year”

What do we think about these statements? Do we trust them? Who do we trust to give us this information?

How do you imagine Jesus reacts to the mathematics contained in these statements? How do they make us feel? How does it feel to be one of the people included in those numbers?

Reflect

- Where are you in the story? Are you someone who has lost something? Is there something or someone you have forgotten to count? Do you feel like the one who has been lost?
- How does it feel to be forgotten, to be overlooked? How does it feel to be noticed, to be sought out and included?
- How would the parables be different if we called them ‘the shepherd who had lost his sheep’ and ‘the woman who had lost her coin’? Are there other names we could give these stories?

Blessed Rupert Mayer was a German Jesuit priest who served the people of Munich in the inter-war years. He looked after migrants who came from the country to the city for work. When asked how he knew people were in genuine need, he said he would rather be duped into helping nine people who were taking advantage of him than turn away the tenth who was in dire need.

What do we think of this? Do the stories of the lost things suggest to us that God’s maths are not our maths?

Do the stories of the lost things suggest to us that God’s maths are not our maths?

Who counts?
Who isn't counted?
What is happening to include those who aren't counted?
Are there people you can help feel counted?

Act

Do a stocktake of your parish or community.

Who counts?

- Who are considered to be people of importance?
- Who has influence and power?

Who isn't counted?

- How many people are sleeping rough?
- How many children are living in poverty?
- Do you know how many children receive free school meals?
- What happens to them in the holidays?
- How many people have visited your local food bank in the last year?

The Church Urban Fund has a tool that shows deprivation statistics for Anglican parishes. (While this will be less interesting for those not in Anglican churches, it will still give a snapshot of the area).

www2.cuf.org.uk/lookup-tool

What is happening to include those who are not being counted?

- Who is doing the counting?
- Is there a homeless project doing great work you can support?

Are there people you can help feel counted?

- Is there a need to visit elderly people in their homes?
- Is there a need for a holiday lunch club for local children?
- Can you organise a rough sleeper count?
- Can you ask your local MP to comment on your findings?

Pray

Like a shepherd who loves a flock, we hold before God our responsibilities, those we notice and those we sometimes overlook.

Like a woman counting precious coins, we hold before God our blessings, we give thanks for that which is most dear to us.

Like a parent who loves their children, we hold before God those who feel lost, those overlooked, those who do not feel included.

Pause for people to light a candle

May we be moved to notice those beloved of God, to seek out those who feel excluded, to rejoice when society is made whole.

Amen

About the author



Marie Pattison is director of Katherine House, a retreat house in Salford owned by the Faithful Companions of Jesus. She is church warden at Sacred Trinity, Salford. Believing that faith and justice go hand in hand, she has campaigned with Church Action on Poverty for a number of years.

THE PRODIGAL AND HIS BROTHER

A Bible study by Sue Richardson



“Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

Read: Luke 15:11–32 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ ‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Think

We read Jesus' parables to ourselves or have them read to us by others. We have heard them often and have been told what they mean many times, so we usually engage directly with our memories of this story without wondering too much about how this parable was first shared and with whom. When Jesus told a story there was always an audience – and probably an audience made up of people from different parts of society. Luke has placed this parable in a section which follows criticism by the Pharisees and the scribes about Jesus spending time with dubious people, so we can imagine that they heard these words, as did people living on the breadline.

The parable is about a family with wealth – inheritance to divide – so they are part of a small and privileged group in the local community; and this is a family that gives people much to gossip about. It was unusual for a child to demand an inheritance before the death of his father – people at the time might have viewed it as a wish to see that father dead prematurely – and in assenting to the request, the father would have caused tongues to wag because of the loss of assets that were necessary to provide for the many parts of the family.

When the spendthrift son returns, the community might also have been keen to see his comeuppance, his reduced status as a servant. The loving acceptance of his return by the father is a subject of gossip – “Has the man lost his mind?” – but the patriarch soothes the ruffled community feelings by killing a calf for a celebratory feast for all.

This would have been a perfectly good and well-rounded story about unconditional love and forgiveness (the version we have heard from childhood) – if it wasn't for Jesus' inclusion of the older brother and his reaction. This is the brother who stayed at home and worked on the family business (he came in from the fields). This is the one who has added to the family's wealth rather than spending it, and he feels resentful enough and aggrieved enough to disown his sibling (“this son of yours”). His father tries to mollify him by reminding him of his good fortune (“all that I have is yours”) but the story closes without a reconciliation and leaves us thinking about relationships and wealth. Does the father lose two sons?

Listen

I'm currently watching a drama series called *Succession*, about a business magnate and his children. The father swings from indulgence and over-protection to manipulative and controlling behaviour in moments. The children are lost. They are confused about the purpose of their lives, they are wilful and demanding, ingratiating and resentful of their father and of each other. Wealth and its possibilities have destroyed their family.

International research is showing us growing inequality in countries around the world, especially countries that have recently enjoyed growth in national wealth in their measured GDP (gross domestic product). The Occupy movement in the UK and elsewhere targeted the 1%, not to invite envy, but to illuminate what happens to a society when a small group command assets that are unavailable to the larger population. They are seen both to spend profligately and to begrudge sharing through taxes and other contributions to the common purse. The idea of relationship comes second to possession.

The story closes without a reconciliation and leaves us thinking about relationships and wealth. Does the father lose two sons?

Where do we get our messages from about wealth and who has it?

Reflect

- Did the younger brother's experience change his understanding of wealth?
- Will the older brother go in to the party? What is the root of his anger?
- Where do we get our messages from about wealth and who has it?
- Can people with secure income and assets recognise when they have 'enough'? Can they be helped by others who have less?
- How do we support each other in generosity and thankfulness?

Act

Think about how your own church reflects the divisions between rich and poor. Is it a community that welcomes and includes everyone? Does it view people in poverty as members of the community, or as victims to be helped, problems to be solved?

If you have time to explore these questions further, you could look at Church Action on Poverty's 'Church of the Poor?' report and other resources – www.church-poverty.org.uk/poorchurch

Pray

Generous God, give us room in our hearts and lives for relationship.
Forgiving God, open up our stony resentment of others' seeming privilege.
Compassionate God, break our resistance to feeling the pain of others.
Faithful God, soothe our fears of loneliness and want.

Teach us that all is gift, bestowed, unearned;
break our connection to having as a way of being.
Love us into relationship so we might care for others' well-being;
and grace us with gratitude and generosity.

Amen

About the author



Sue Richardson has worked for Christian Aid for more than three decades as a Regional Staff member in the East Midlands and latterly as Christian Aid's Theological Education Adviser. This role brings Sue into contact with those who are charged with the formation of church leaders, both ordained and lay, and has led her into many encounters where her interest in linking spirituality to action has been tested and enriched. She is Roman Catholic with a particular experience of the church in Brazil and a commitment to a theology of liberation. Her friends and colleagues in Brazil have offered her approaches to this integration of faith and life through the reading of scripture which have resourced Sue and which she tries to share with others.

LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN

A Bible study by Revd Rajbharat Patta



Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us

Read: Luke 16:19–31 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house – ²⁸ for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Think

It has always been the dominant and the powerful that have been heard in biblical texts and our interpretations of them. I invite you to listen to the subaltern voices in this texts and also in our society – for the voice of the divine echoes in the voices of the subalterns.

[Editor’s note: ‘subaltern’ describes groups and people who are excluded from society and have no voice or power.]

This parable includes three characters – the rich man, Lazarus and Abraham – and a narrator. Most of the talking is done by the rich man and Abraham, with some interventions by the narrator. It is interesting and surprising to note that in the whole of the parable not a single word of Lazarus is recorded, for Lazarus’ voice has been conspicuously silenced. It was the rich man who silenced Lazarus’ voice before death, and later it was Abraham who shadowed Lazarus and silenced his voice. Lazarus has been forced into speechlessness by the conditions around him throughout the story. His poverty, his hunger, his homelessness, his powerlessness, his not being ‘famous’ in society, his wounded self and psyche all led to his (non)being as non-person, non-identity and non-public, pushing him into the mode of speechlessness.

To make an observation on the text: Most versions of the Bible call this parable “The rich man and Lazarus”, and older editions have the entire parable in red letters to indicate that it was spoken by Jesus. Luke 16:1 says that “Then Jesus said to his disciples...” and verse 15 says, “he said to them...” and then in 17: “Jesus said to his disciples...” Therefore, the whole of this parable is assumed to be said by Jesus, though no mention of “Jesus said to his disciples” is recorded in the parable itself. Neither are Jesus’ words attached at the end of the parable with his concluding exhortations.

Listen

If we can find a way to recover the voice and speech of Lazarus, we can uphold the worth and value of his life, both before and after death. Can the subaltern speak? Yes, the subaltern can speak, for those that have ears will listen to their narratives. Here is the voice of Lazarus:

“When we were dying of hunger and poverty, this rich man was insensitive to the needs of the people around him and lived a complacent selfish life in pomp and pleasure,” remembered Lazarus, on his deathbed with a terminal illness, for he lived as a homeless person at the gates of this rich man’s villa, and fed on the crumbs of this man alongside the dogs, and the dogs even licked his sores.

A few days later Lazarus died, and since he was an outcaste, no one came forward to bury his polluted corpse, leaving it unburied. But fortunately, the angels carried Lazarus to be with God, where Abraham also found a refuge.

Afterwards the rich man also died, and tens of thousands of rich people came to his ceremonial funeral service paying tributes to him, praising him for what he was not.

Eventually the rich man was taken to Hades, where he was tormented, a price for his being rich and for creating poverty around him. He looked up, saw Abraham at God’s side, and was startled to see Lazarus by Abraham’s side. **“Can a homeless, poor ‘slum dog’ be at the side of Abraham, the father of the faithful?”** exclaimed the once-upon-a-time rich man. (For in the kingdom of God, the rich man’s position is reversed.)

If Lazarus spoke in this text, all the evil things that the rich man did to become even richer by making the poor poorer would have been exposed. If Lazarus spoke, he would have narrated how he was pushed by the rich empire into poverty, homelessness and hunger. If Lazarus spoke, he would have testified what an impossibility it would be for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. If Lazarus spoke, he would have disclosed that the real meaning of life is in sharing and caring for one another, for life cannot be quantified into monetary value.

If Lazarus spoke, he would have emphasised the spirituality of dispossession, where each individual is called to give up greed and bridge the gap between rich and poor, by identifying with the poor. If Lazarus spoke, he would have said, **“Look for the divine among the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”** If Lazarus spoke, he would have called his listeners to practise what has been preached by Moses and the prophets. If Lazarus spoke, he would have emphasised that being grounded in one’s faith traditions like Moses or the prophet(s) leads us to be inclusive, faithful and tolerant, looking for truths in other faith traditions. If Lazarus spoke, he would have called on the rich to repent, seeking reparations from rich to poor, so that the world would become a better place to live. If Lazarus spoke, he would have affirmed the continuation of God’s revelation in the activity of the life and death of Jesus Christ, who was sent back to life by God in resurrection. If Lazarus spoke, he would have said that he died while he was still living, and is still living while he is dead.

When Lazarus speaks, the divine is located in his voice, for in the speech of the subalterns, echoes the voice of the divine. Those that have ears, let them listen.

If Lazarus spoke, he would have narrated how he was pushed by the rich empire into poverty, homelessness and hunger

Which people
occupy Lazarus' place
in our society?
How can their voices
be heard?

Reflect

- Conventional interpretations have conveniently said that Abraham's voice is God's voice, or that Abraham, as the father of faith and father of Israel, represents God in this parable. But what do you think? Where is God in this text? Or to be more precise, where is the *voice* of God?
- What do *you* think Lazarus would say if he spoke in the parable?
- Which people occupy Lazarus' place in our society? How can their voices be heard?

Act

The next time you see a news story or a TV programme about poverty, ask yourself: Whose story are we hearing? Whose voices are being excluded? What would they say if we could hear them?

Church Action on Poverty's 'Voices from the Margins' project enables people to tell their own stories about their lived experiences of poverty. Follow the blog at www.voicesfromthemargins.org.uk. If you use social media, you could help to make voices heard by sharing stories and videos with your friends.

Pray

Lord Jesus, you say that
when someone gives food to the hungry,
when someone gives a drink to the thirsty,
when someone welcomes a stranger,
when someone clothes the poor,
when someone cares for the sick
and when someone visits a prisoner,
they are really doing it for you.

Enable us, with the wealth of our society, to do these things,
but help us first to listen to the voices of those we desire to assist and to welcome,
those who are on the margins,
because, in their strength and love and endurance,
they are your voice, your words for us today.

Lord Jesus, we pray in your name.

Amen

Revd Nick Jowett, Church Action on Poverty in Sheffield

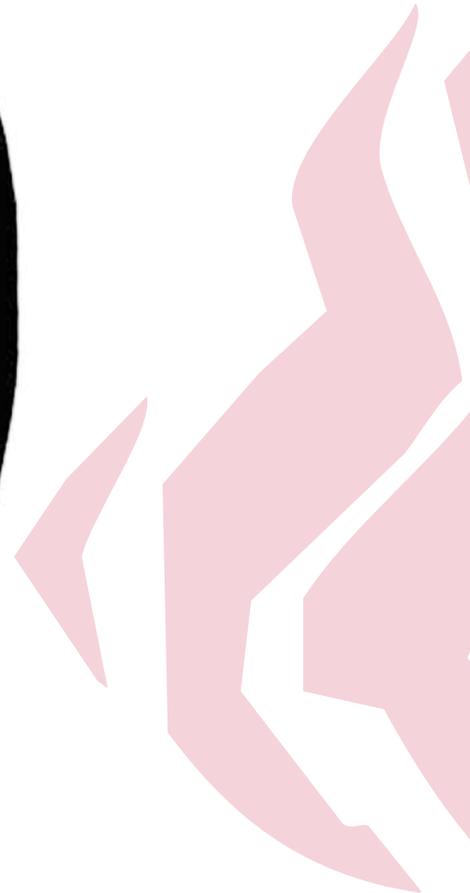
About the author



Revd Rajbharat Patta is an ordained Minister of Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, India and currently serves as an Authorised Minister at Stockport Methodist Circuit with a pastoral charge of Heaton Moor, Heaton Mersey and St John's Churches. He has just submitted his PhD thesis on 'subaltern public theology.' He blogs at thepattas.blogspot.com. He is married to Shiny and has two sons, Jubi and Jai ho.

THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

A Bible study by Revd Nick Jowett



“Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?”

Read: Matthew 20:1–16 (New Revised Standard Version)

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Think

Many of the people who listened to this story will have been peasants who might well not have thought that Jesus was really telling them about God (the vineyard owner) and Israel (the vineyard and its workers), but instead were likely to see it as a precise picture of their own working lives. If you were poor – the vast majority of the population – you could keep alive by growing food if you had your own land, but many had no land of their own, either because they had fallen into debt or because they were the ‘excess children’ of peasants who could no longer feed their families. In such a situation, you had to keep alive by working for others, as and when they needed your labour. Harvest time was one of the times when landowners needed extra pairs of hands.

And that seems to be the reason why the vineyard owner in Jesus’ parable needs more workers in his vineyard – to get the grapes harvested. But why does he keep going back to the marketplace to hire more day labourers? We aren’t told, but it’s easy to imagine that the landowner initially hires those he can find in the marketplace, but, as the day wears on, he realises he will need more workers to get the job done and goes out suspecting that more unemployed people will have turned up available for work. “Why are you standing here idle all day?” he asks them, and they reply – no doubt through gritted teeth – “Because no one has hired us.”

Those hired towards the very end of the day will have been staring into the abyss: another day with very little pay, and starvation threatening. But that soon changes, because the vineyard owner gives them the denarius, the full day’s wage, and they and their families will have food in their stomachs tonight. But of course those who worked the whole day start complaining: they think that they should have got more, pro rata, than those hired later on. And it seems their frustration is increased, partly because they really have no rational grounds for complaint – they were only ever promised a denarius for the day’s work – but also perhaps because they feel the landowner is flaunting his power over them, whimsically paying them all the same for very different amounts of work. But in one important respect this is a very good employer, because he gives all the workers a living wage, at least for the one day.

Perhaps, then, it’s the ‘system’ that is no good. “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” says the master of the vineyard, and he might well defend himself by reminding them of the expense and effort it has taken to establish the vineyard, with no harvests in the early years. But still, he can now do what he wants because he is rich and powerful, and the fact that one landowner is kind and generous on one occasion does not in any way change the order of a world in which rich elites Hoover up the land and wealth of the peasant class and leave many of them on the verge of absolute penury.

Listen

Arbitrary decisions which make the difference between someone having their own food to eat or having to beg are still part of our rich-but-unequal society:

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) said arbitrary rules built in to the way Universal Credit is calculated leave some families unable to predict how much they will be paid each month, leaving households in debt and unable to budget. It cites the case of a working couple with two children who since claiming universal credit last year have seen monthly payments fluctuate from between £1,185 to zero because of pay date and

The fact that one landowner is kind and generous on one occasion does not in any way change the order of a world in which rich elites Hoover up the land and wealth of the peasant class

assessment period clashes. They have found it impossible to budget and are now in rent arrears for the first time in their lives.

The Guardian, 6 August 2018

Visit www.voicesfromthemargins.org.uk to read and watch more stories of how people are trapped in poverty by Universal Credit.

Reflect

- Do you see the vineyard owner as bad or good, or something in between?
- How much do you sympathise with the first-hired workers in their complaints?
- Do people tend to blame the behaviour of those who are actually victims?
- How can society give dignity and the power to act to those who are currently poor and vulnerable?
- Does this mean curbing the power and reducing the wealth of those 'at the top'?
- Is there still a place for spontaneous or voluntary generosity, like that of the landowner, in a more justly structured society?
- If this story is interpreted politically rather than religiously, as we have done here, what kind of 'kingdom' was Jesus envisaging?

Act

Help out at a local food bank. If there is an unthreatening opportunity to listen to some people's stories, then listen. If they are willing for their stories – anonymised – to be told in, e.g. your church, a letter to the local paper, a local political meeting etc – do so.

Sign up for email actions from the End Hunger UK campaign at www.endhungeruk.org - or explore whether you could set up a campaign group locally.

Pray

Lord Jesus, in your stories you show us the society you lived in, a society in which everything was stacked against the peasant workers and where the poor might have to depend upon the whimsical generosity of the rich.

We face the hard truth that, two thousand years later, our wealthy society still often treats its most vulnerable members with punitive arbitrariness.

But you always point us towards a 'kingdom of heaven', a society and a world where both the structures and the choices of individuals seek to imitate that overwhelming, unearned generosity we receive every day from our loving creator. May we strive towards that kingdom in your name.

Amen

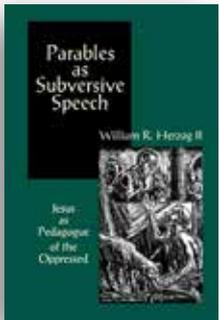
About the author



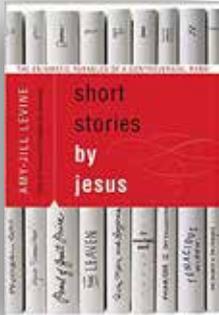
Revd Nick Jowett retired in 2012 after serving as a parish priest in the Diocese of Sheffield, and chair of Church Action on Poverty in Sheffield. He has written for the *Guardian*, *Times* and *Church Times*, and published a book on 'alternative saints', *Wisdom's Children*.

FURTHER READING

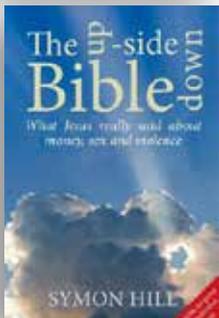
Dangerous Stories was inspired by excellent work done on the parables by several different authors. If you have enjoyed these studies, do take a look at some or all of these books:



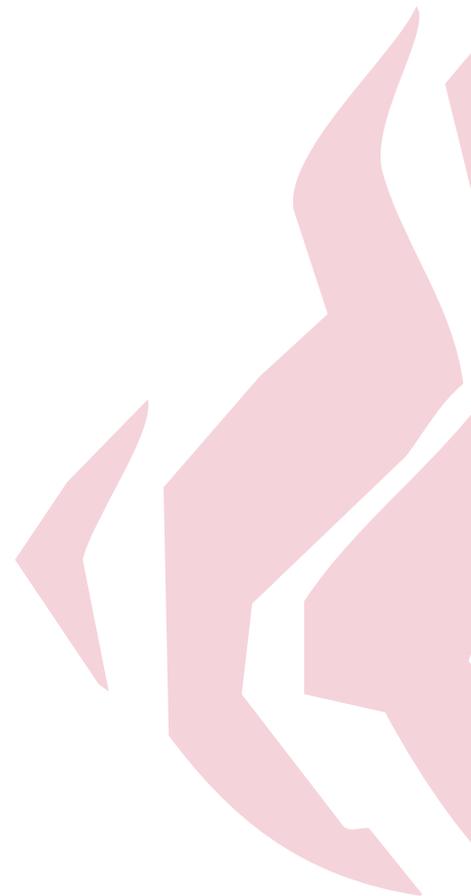
***Parables as Subversive Speech:
Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed***
by William R Herzog II
(Westminster John Knox Press, 1994)



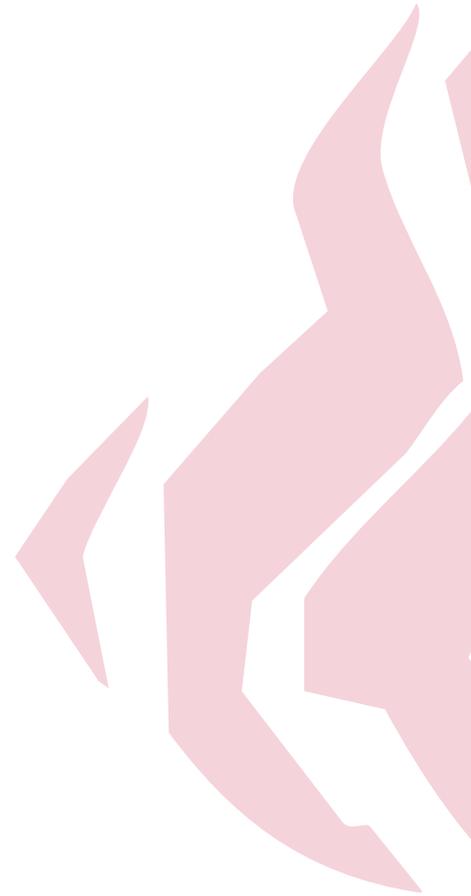
***Short Stories by Jesus:
The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi***
by Amy-Jill Levine
(Bravo Ltd, 2015)



***The Upside-Down Bible:
What Jesus Really Said About
Money, Sex and Violence***
by Symon Hill
(Darton Longman and Todd, 2015)









DANGEROUS STORIES

The Bible shows us again and again that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed. People on the margins.

But too often, when we read scripture in our churches, we focus on other aspects of the story, or we are so familiar with the text that we don't notice the challenging things it has to say to us.

Jesus' parables are one of the best examples of this problem. When we read and think about the parables, we almost always look for allegorical, spiritual meanings.

But the parables are actually very earthly stories – and if we try to put ourselves in the place of their original audience, we discover very different messages in them.

These five Bible studies will challenge you to get alongside the people who are on the margins of our own society – and to speak out for justice. They will show you how the parables are subversive, dangerous stories.

