

Our Royal Beginning and End

By Linda Rex

September 25, 2022, PROPER 21—It appeared that the topic of interest this weekend was her majesty Queen Elizabeth II's death and the succession of Prince Charles (III) to the throne of England. For better or for worse, people from all over the world have been touched in some way by the long arm of this royal family's commonwealth and country.

I sometimes wonder if our fascination with royalty is bound up in some way with the spiritual reality of our royal beginning in the Triune God. Is there perhaps a core realization that we were made for so much more than this mundane existence? Could it be that God's "very good" descriptor of his human creations includes our calling to steward the creation he set us within just as a godly king or queen stewards a country?

In both of the bookends of the Bible, Genesis and Revelation, we see humans in the garden in relationship with God and participating in his care of the creation. The revelation that we are to be "kings and priests" with God as the end result of all Christ has done resonates with our original call to stewardship, and calls us up to a new way of looking at how we live even now in this world as citizens of God's kingdom. This stewardship, or being kings and priests with Christ, involves a real participation in Christ's own self-offering—a laying down of one's life and a sharing of all we have been given with others.

Indeed, with the coming of Christ, the kingdom of God entered our human sphere and set up shop. Like the stone "cut out without hands" in Daniel's vision (Dan. 2:34, 45), the kingdom of God was inaugurated in our human sphere in a new way by the incarnation of Jesus Christ—God in human flesh. The king of the kingdom forged within human flesh our true citizenship in his eternal kingdom, life in relationship with the Father in the Spirit. In what many call the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus showed how the "prodigal" or "wasteful" Father freely welcomed home our wandering humanity (younger son) and forgave our futile efforts to work ourselves into his good graces (older son).

We move from this parable in Luke's gospel to one about the unjust steward, and then on into the parable for today in Luke 16:19–31. In this story, it may seem that Jesus is simply talking some more about money and being rich, and about going to heaven or hell, but in the progression of the parables, we find he is talking about kingdom realities. He is focused on his reason for being there and the listeners' need for what Jesus was doing and would do as he worked his way forward toward his upcoming death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

In this Sunday's parable, Jesus began talking about a rich man who wore splendid, luxurious clothes and merrily enjoyed the benefits of his wealth. I get the sense that, in itself, having nice things and enjoying what blessings God gives is not a problem in Jesus' eyes. It is the heart and motivation, and what we do with them, that is a concern though. I also realize that some of Jesus' listeners were probably thinking to themselves, "He must be a good man like me. He loves the Lord and is one of God's chosen—that's why he's so blessed."

Jesus wasn't content to leave them in this false state of self-exaltation—his story got a bit darker. There was a poor beggar name Lazarus lying at this rich man's gate, covered in sores. Lazarus would have been happy simply to have had some crumbs from the rich man's table, but all he got was what was left from the slop that he couldn't keep the stray dogs from eating first. And what was worse, these dogs hung around and licked the poor man's wounds whether he wanted them to or not. Were they waiting for him to die?

In ancient Jewish thought, every Jew after death ended up in Hades (or Sheol), the place of death, either in torment or paradise. Jesus used this cultural understanding with regards to death to explain his point (not to establish some doctrine regarding our eternal destiny). Lazarus died, Jesus went on to say, having starved to death lying outside the rich man's front gate. And he ended up where every good Jew wanted to end up, in Abraham's bosom—an ancient expression which meant paradise. A little later, the rich man died and also went to the place of the dead, but in a much less pleasant location.

Going on with Jesus' story: while he suffered torments, the rich man saw Lazarus in paradise, where he thought he should be. He asked Abraham to send Lazarus to him with a drink of water. Let's pause for a moment. What does this say about the rich man's view of himself and of Lazarus? Hasn't this been humanity's issue since the fall, this determining that some of us are over while others are under? Wasn't

this the reason Lazarus was in Hades in the first place? Perhaps he would not have died had the rich man simply saw him as worthy of his love and grace (something each of us desperately need from God) and had helped him.

But this was not the sole point Jesus was making. He went on to say that the rich man then told Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers so they wouldn't make the same mistake he did. Notice the rich man is still treating Lazarus like an errand boy or slave. He has not repented or changed his attitude towards those who were not as blessed as he was. Abraham replied that the five brothers already had the law and the prophets to warn them so sending Lazarus would be pointless. As those who heard the law and prophets read in synagogue each sabbath, every Jewish man had no excuse for not knowing what God says about caring for the poor and needy, and helping the sick.

The rich man said that if his brothers saw someone rise from the dead, then they would repent. And Abraham countered that even if they did see someone rise from the dead they would not repent. Here is Jesus' pointed reference to his own death and resurrection, the very event he was at that moment intentionally walking toward on behalf of all humanity, counting each and every one of us worthy of God's love and grace, and working to ensure that we each have a place in his kingdom. The One who had all the riches of divine existence had not been content to allow our beggared humanity to starve to death and suffer outside his gates. No, he had come and had joined us in our very sorry state in order raise us up into new life through his death and resurrection.

The Jewish leaders listening to Jesus had made up their minds that they were already members of God's kingdom, the special people who were already included and blessed. They did not see themselves as the hungry, sick beggar lying outside the gate. Nor did they see they were meant to reflect the divine Majesty who would lay down his life for the sake of others. And they certainly did not see their need for Jesus nor did they see their need to repent or change their minds. And the greatest bit of irony to this whole parable—Jesus did raise a real Lazarus from the dead, and what did the leaders do? They immediately went out and plotted to kill him—and Jesus. They certainly did not repent and turn to Jesus.

In the New Testament reading for this Sunday, 1 Timothy 6:6–19, the apostle Paul tells us to grab hold of eternal life and to fight the good fight of faith. Part of this has to do with having a healthy view of money and the pleasures of this life—embracing contentment and generosity as part of our human stewardship of all God has made and given us the responsibility to care for. And there is also the need to, as Jesus did, make the bold confession of faith—laying down one's life for others, being willing to offer it all on the behalf of those who are suffering and in need. In the words of St. Francis of Assisi, it is in forgiving that we experience forgiveness, in giving of ourselves that we receive, and in dying that we are born to eternal life. As God's kings and priests even now, we acknowledge our own need for Jesus, while freely sharing with others the abundant blessings God has given to us in Christ and by his Spirit.

Lord, thank you for reminding us that all that we consider our own we receive from the Father of lights as a gift, through your generous self-offering in the Spirit. Grant us the grace to see others as you see them, Father—our own brothers and sisters, unique equals who have been made at one with you and each other and have been given stewardship over all you have made, through Jesus and by your Spirit. Amen.

“Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.' ” Luke 16:19–31 NASB