

The parable of Lazarus and Dives through an environmental lens

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 25 September 2022

A Reflection by Thea Ormerod

Creation 4C

Amos 6: 1, 4-7; Luke 16: 19-31

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Thea Ormerod, president of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC), a semi-retired Social Worker, long-time social justice activist and practicing Catholic. (I'm still practicing at being a Catholic, if truth be known.)

I'm honoured to be invited to speak to you today in this Season of Creation. Giving a lay person an opportunity to give the homily is not something that happens in the Catholic Church in this country, so this is a most unusual opportunity for me. However, I'm not a theologian or a scripture scholar, so the following are merely my personal reflections, inspired by my faith in Jesus and my passionate commitment to climate justice.

In the Gospel reading today, the story-teller Luke has Jesus painting a stark picture of the consequences of simply ignoring the poor and marginalised and for failing to listen to the prophets. The story Jesus tells is one of two sharply drawn characters, a '*rich man*' - who is never named - who '*used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently every day*'. Jesus was likely to be drawing from the portrayal of the rich in Amos, who '*dine on lambs and stall-fattened veal and drink wine by the bowlful*'.

The other character is the poor man - who has a name, Lazarus - who longed to fill himself with the rich man's scraps and was covered in sores. Jesus, the story-teller, says that dogs '*came and licked his sores*', I think for added effect.

The scene in the afterlife was likewise one of extremes, with Lazarus in Abraham's bosom and the rich man reduced to begging for a drop of water to cool his tongue. There's no danger of missing the point!

Then there's the part about not listening to the prophets, or even if someone rises from the dead. My understanding is that this Gospel was written decades after Jesus' time, and it was a matter of great regret to Luke that people were still not listening to Jesus' teachings, even after he had risen from the dead.

No doubt all of this was fodder for the hellfire and brimstone preachers of old!

Of course, this story needs to be held in balance with the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son of a couple of Sundays ago, and Jesus' many other teachings which tell us of a God of mercy.

Nonetheless, Jesus' intention is to wake his followers up – to wake us up - regarding the consequences of our moral choices. How we conduct our lives is important. Who we listen to for guidance, what sub-cultures within our society we draw from to tell us what is so-called 'normal' – these are important. The choices we make have effects on other people, for good or for ill. And we will have to live with them in eternal life.

Everyone here in this church kinda gets that. In fact, I imagine most people here struggle with an inner critical voice telling you that you're not good enough, and no doubt you give generously to what seems an overwhelming number of needy causes. No-one here approximates the 'rich man' – who is really an archetype – who never, ever gives a thought for the poor person at his gate.

Yet I suspect no-one here has arrived at a state of perfect virtue either. The moral life is a life-long struggle to shape my life step-by-step so it responds more and more fully to the challenges put to us by the Gospel message.

It's difficult when we're surrounded by a culture that urges us to consume, to travel, to make ourselves and (even more seductively) to make our families comfortable. Indeed, economic growth depends on it. Living a high-consuming lifestyle is portrayed as normal, good and, by implication, right. A constant stream of advertising gives us to believe we're entitled to the so-called 'best that life can offer'.

We're also surrounded by the idea that changes in our personal lifestyle make no appreciable difference. Today's Gospel challenges that idea. The choices we make do have effects on other people – greenhouse gases caused by how we travel, what we eat and, most especially, what we invest our savings in, do count.

I was surprised to learn recently, that by far the most effective individual action anyone can take is to switch their savings or super to banks and funds which don't finance fossil fuel-intensive industries.

My personal lifestyle choices, even more fundamentally, make a difference to me. By acting in line with my values, my integrity grows and my determination to make climate action a priority grows.

That's what I have found personally. Living in line with my beliefs energises my work for change at a systemic level. I am clearer about how wrong it is that Australia's export of coal and Liquefied Natural Gas in enormous quantities, even though it's widely seen as normal.

Australia has a staggering 45% of the world's proposed new coal mines and expansions of existing projects. ⁱ

How is that OK?

It's also considered normal for the Big Four Banks to invest in fossil fuel projects to maximise the short-term returns for customers, regardless of how damaging those projects are to the viability of the earth's ecosystems.

It's normal that so much news focuses on the rich and powerful, while the hundreds of children who died in the floods in Pakistan are treated as statistics.

Jesus offers us an alternative. To Jesus, each of those children have names and are now '*in the bosom of Abraham*' - and Sarah.

Jesus knows the names of every one of the 6,300 people killed by super-storm Typhoon Haiyan which swept through the Philippines in 2013. He knows the names of every person who lost their lives in the 2019-2020 Australian bushfires, and of everyone who has lost their homes because of sea level rise. They are, at a practical level, the people largely ignored by the world's rich and powerful.

Critical to the moral struggle is who we're listening to. Are we swept up in what's 'normal' or do we take the Gospel message as our guide, along with today's prophets – the climate scientists, civil society actors who are dedicated to the common good, to Pope Francis?

It is that so-called 'normal' lifestyle which puts Australians at the very highest end of per capita carbon emissions. We may have just 0.3% of the world's population, but Australia's coal and LNG, when burnt either here or overseas, make up 4% of the world's carbon emissions. ⁱⁱ

Today's prophets tell us that 95% of Australia's coal must remain in the ground to even have a 50% chance of keeping to a 1.5C of warming. ⁱⁱⁱ

That's just a 50% chance!

Parties to the Paris Accord are taking 1.5°C as some kind of benchmark, but look around the world now and tell me if 1.1°C is truly a 'safe' level of warming?!

That's why many of the ethical standards around all this - which are accepted as normal by Australians today, are actually quite insane.

Don't get me wrong, we in Australian Religious Response to Climate Change are overjoyed to have a federal Government that is at least committed to a transition away from fossil fuels towards renewable energy. We're grateful for a government that is listening, and willing to work with multiple stakeholders to drive an ambitious shift in the right direction.

But there's a massive contradiction between policy settings around domestic emissions reduction on the one hand, and continuing business-as-usual regarding coal and gas exports on the other. It's a form of insanity.

That's why ARRCC has a Day of Action on Thursday, 13th October calling on the federal government to do more for climate justice, at least by:

- ❖ No longer approving new coal and gas projects and expansions
- ❖ Ending public subsidies to fossil fuel companies
- ❖ Fully respecting the rights of First Nations peoples to protect their Country
- ❖ Re-starting contributions to the UN Green Climate Fund

Along with other ARRCC supporters around Australia we want to show the Albanese Government that everyday people of faith care deeply about the above climate justice outcomes, as expressed through an open letter we're publishing that day in the media, signed by senior faith leaders.

If you're free on the morning of 13th October, we'd love to have a reasonable turn-out at the Multi-faith Service at St Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta. The Service starts at 9.30 am.

In the corporate campaign side of our work, as part of the Move Beyond Coal, we in ARRCC plan to put pressure on the National Australia Bank to stop investing in Whitehaven Coal, which is seeking capital for its plans to massively expand its coal mining operations.

To me, this is an integral part of an authentic, wholistic spirituality. Taking action in solidarity with those suffering at the frontlines, or 'front gate' – as in today's reading - of our very unequal world, I believe is as much an expression of our spirituality as coming here on Sundays for Worship.

If you share our concern for those who are suffering now from the impacts of global heating, and for those who will suffer in the future, we invite you to join ARRCC in our work for change.

ⁱ <https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/coal-expected-to-remain-dominant-source-of-power-in-the-coming-decade--fitch-solutions-2021-06-10>

ⁱⁱ https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/P667-High-Carbon-from-a-Land-Down-Under-WEB_0_0.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03821-8>