

## LOVE & MONEY

*MUC Fellowship@10, 28 September 2025*

*Alison Sampson, reflecting on Luke 16:19-31*

A few years ago, my colleague Rev Nguyễn Hữu Trí took a group of young people from a nearby church on a trip to Vietnam. They planned to visit Christian communities aligned with factory workers, street kids and people addicted to heroin, both to build connections and to witness the gospel being embodied in these contexts. As Trí tells it, the young people turned up at the airport decked out in brand new gear purchased especially for the trip. And so off they went with their bright new backpacks, ergonomic walking shoes, high tech breathable fabrics and versatile layering options to encounter Vietnam's poor.

Upon arriving in Vietnam, they met up with a group with whom Trí has a long-term relationship. One of the Vietnamese women pointed to one of the new backpacks in surprise. 'I made that!', she said. They all examined the backpack, and she showed them her maker's marks.

It's rare for us to know where things were made, who made them, or how the money flows. Instead, hermetically sealed charming goods arrive in our shops or at our door as if brought there by the hand of God; our shopping feels value neutral. Production methods are such that even products labelled 'eco' can have lasting environmental consequences: yet poisoned air, soil and water have little visible impact on our daily lives. We don't see the tropical fruit forest at Binh Duong mown down to make way for Western factories. Modern supply chains are such that it is almost impossible to purchase goods that don't involve some form of slavery: yet enslaved people are almost invisible to our eyes. Capitalism builds a chasm between rich consumers and land, labour and capital, but through a quirk of fate or the grace of God, perhaps, on this day a young person from Melbourne was brought face to face with the person who made their backpack.

Trí grabbed the opportunity and invited the young Vietnamese woman to tell her story. It turned out that, at 16, her family had tried to force her into a deeply unsuitable marriage, and so she fled. As you can imagine, there aren't many options for a rural girl on the streets of Saigon; thank goodness she was found by a Christian community, which organised a job for her in one of the factories. This factory employs children as young as 12, paying them a few dollars a day to make gear for Kathmandu. The community gets the youngest kids out and enrolls them in school or vocational training; then, when they are older, the kids mostly return to the factory but in more highly paid roles. The 16-year-old girl was employed at this higher level.

She described her work to the young Australians. She told them how, during the Covid lockdowns, she had had to live at work for months on end; no one was allowed to leave the building. Even in more normal times, she works twelve hours a day with no paid sick leave and no food. She was deeply shocked to learn that the backpack was purchased for about the same as she earns each month: roughly \$200AUD.

Should she leave? What are her options? In Vietnam, orphans and runaways are considered to be unclean, sinners. It would be hard for her to return to her village; she fears shame and punishment.

The forces and pressures which shape her life are too big to escape. Perhaps that's why Lazarus in today's story is portrayed as entirely passive. He's broke, he's covered with sores, he's unclean: and so he is laid at the gate of a rich man's house, the one person who might be able to help. Notice, he doesn't take himself there; instead, he is placed.

The rich man isn't passive. In the Greek, we are told, 'he always clothed himself in purple and fine linen'. In other words, he has options, he has power, he dresses himself, and he does so in luxury imported clothes right down to his underpants, for 'underpants' is what 'fine linen' refers to. Think: merino briefs. The Kathmandu website describes them like this: 'Naturally breathable, moisture-wicking, and odour-repellent, merino wool offers nature-tested performance. Its temperature regulating properties keep you cool when it's hot and warm when it's not ... The perfect baselayer for hiking, snow sports, travelling, and everyday wear.' End quote. Merino undies are just what you need for a trip to Vietnam. A pair will set you back a mere \$59.98. If you're the 12-year-old making them, that's about three weeks' work.

Lazarus wasn't wearing merino undies, nor any fine linen at all. He was dressed in rags and covered in sores; he was also hungry. Like a factory worker doing a twelve hour shift with no food, he longed to eat the crumbs which fell from the rich man's daily feasting table. Instead, unclean animals – street kids, Gentiles, base Christian communities – saw his pain, and licked his wounds with healing saliva.

The time came that both men died. Lazarus, still passive, was carried by angels to Abraham's side; there is nothing he did to deserve it. The rich man, however, was sent to the place of the dead. And this is where we find out something interesting: the rich man knows Lazarus's name. For he calls to Father Abraham and asks him to send Lazarus to serve him in his agony. In a globalized world, very few of us stumble across the maker of our backpack; very few of us know the names of those who lie at our gates in distress. Instead we know other names, like trade agreements. Special economic zones. Piecework. Labour laws. Free market. Toxic waste. Ecocide. Closer to home the names are a little different. Wage theft, perhaps, or stage three tax cuts. Capital gains, negative gearing, investment properties, corporate welfare, CEO bonuses and benefits well below the poverty line. Put all these names together and we have a situation where Australia has long been building a chasm between rich and poor, both within and beyond its borders, and that chasm has widened dramatically over the years.

Indeed, the chasm in Australia between the very rich and the poor is now greater than Rome's was during its heyday. Historians estimate that in 150 C.E., the top one percent of Roman society controlled 16 per cent of the wealth. In Australia today, they control nearly 20 per cent; in the US, nearly 40 per cent. We can all name the billionaires. But in Jesus' story, the story we commit our lives to, only the beggar is important enough to be named. His name is Lazarus, which means 'the one whom God helps'.

Is his name ironic? He doesn't have fine linen underpants. Or is his name about something deeper? For Jesus teaches that the poor are blessed, the hungry will be filled, and those who weep will laugh, while the rich can expect only woe. They received so much comfort in this life, they never turned to God. (Luke 6:20-26). They never learned the ways of justice and solidarity, the ways of generosity

and self-giving love, the ways of God's kingdom-culture. In their fullness they had no room for God's love, or God's people, or God's blessings.

'How difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God,' says Jesus a bit later in Luke's account. Indeed. Myself, I live in the inner city. I walk past beggars every day, and I am rarely kind. Instead I think, 'Someone should do something,' or maybe, 'Ice addict.' I think, 'Who carries cash in this day and age, and even if I did, do I really want to support their habit?' I think, 'The lack of public housing is a massive problem, when will the government fix it? When will Centrelink be a responsible agency, not adversarial, not sadistic?'

It would be nice if someone bridged the chasm, I think, which is why the rich man calls up again to Father Abraham and tells him to send Lazarus to warn his rich family. But Abraham replies, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

Which is ironic, because it's not Lazarus who's in the place of the dead. It's the rich man. He's the one who's dead and buried and has passed through the gates of Hades (not hell) into the netherworld. He's the one in whom something essential has died. He's the one who ignored the Law's insistence on neighbourliness, and the Prophets' insistence on justice. He's the one who has grabbed at sumptuous feasts and fine linen, while choosing moral apathy and indifference. He's the one who has fundamentally refused to see Lazarus as kin, and the alleviation of human suffering as his responsibility. He's the one who, like me, has walked past every beggar on the block. And so he has died and is in the place of the dead, far from Father Abraham's embrace; and the chasm is of his own making.

It's not that you shouldn't worship God and money; it's that you can't (Luke 16:13). And until you see Lazarus as your sibling, you can't claim Abraham as your father. In this story and in this life, there are many gates in the walls which separate the wealthy from the poor. While alive, the rich man could have opened the gate and served Lazarus. He could have fed him, dressed him, and arranged medical care and shelter: but he didn't. Because keeping gates bolted shut is easy. We all do it, as individuals and a nation: we try and protect ourselves and our way of life from the demands of those who are poor.

But if we seek a flourishing life, a life overflowing with goodness and mercy, then we'd better fling open those gates and serve those who have been placed outside. For 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me ... just as you did it to one of the least of my siblings,' says Jesus, 'you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:31ff). Every time we open the gates and serve, every time we say no to exploitation or vote against private wealth creation, every time we choose not to buy yet more fancy linens but instead give something away, we take another step towards Christ and towards life in abundance.

Of course, I stand here convicted by my own words. I stand here convicted by the backpack I used to bring my laptop here, and the clothes I am wearing, and the economic structures in which I operate. As Jesus says, 'How difficult it is!' Like the people who first heard him, I often wonder, 'Who,

then, can be saved?' Who can be liberated from the economic webs in which we are all entangled? Whose stone cold heart can be made into a heart of beating flesh? Who can experience the liberation of letting go of possessions, and the joy of connection and community?

Thankfully, Jesus replies, 'What is impossible for people is possible for God.' (Luke 18:24-26). But this doesn't cancel out responsibility. The Jesus of Luke's gospel is very clear: the rich have choices, the rich have power, the rich are called to bridge the gap, and in this they will know salvation. But in faith, we can take one step at a time. We can trust the Spirit to lead us through the gates, the doors, the openings, again and again, until we have emptied ourselves and made room for God; and until we have no longer locked ourselves away from Lazarus, but can share in the embrace.

Perhaps heeding the voice of the dead man is the first next step.

In the words of Janet Morley, let us pray: Holy God, whose name is not honoured where the needy are not served, and the powerless are treated with contempt: may we embrace our neighbour with the same tenderness that we ourselves require; so your justice may be fulfilled in love: through Jesus Christ, Amen. Ω