

Beggars on Lambton Quay
25 September 2016

Luke 16:19-31
1 Timothy 6:6-19

I have lived in the Wellington Region for well over 30 years, and during this time, I have seen many changes in the urban landscape. Buildings have come and gone. Whole streets have disappeared, and new ones have emerged. But one change I find particularly disturbing is that it is now an everyday occurrence to see beggars in downtown Wellington. It would seem you cannot walk the length of Lambton Quay at lunchtime on a weekday without passing at least three or four people begging.

Beggars provoke a variety of responses in people. Some pretend they do not exist, and completely ignore them.

Some say it is counterproductive to give to beggars, and that we should instead contribute to charities that assist the homeless. And I encourage you to support the excellent work of organisations like Soup Kitchen Wellington, the Wellington City Mission, and DCM Wellington, formerly known as the Downtown Community Ministry. And get behind the 14 Hours Homeless fundraiser on Friday 7 October, when hundreds of people around the country sleep out in a car, on a couch, or on cardboard to raise funds to help New Zealand's homeless population. But don't ignore the beggars.

Some point out that those begging may have addictions that we are feeding. Now there can be no doubt some use their donations to purchase things like alcohol and tobacco. But we can't simply assume this about every beggar we see. Besides, even those who are abusing themselves with substances still have to survive somehow. And we

should also remember Jesus did not drug test anybody or ask to see their insurance policies before he helped them.

Some suggest begging is a lifestyle choice, and that those who beg do quite well out of it. Back in 2010, Dominion-Post journalist Dave Burgess received over \$160 worth of food and money after going undercover as a beggar for two two-hour stints. He donated his proceeds to the Wellington City Mission. I don't know how much money the average beggar makes, but I would be surprised if many did as well as Burgess. Now there may well be some people begging who don't really need to beg, but I would suggest they are the exception, not the rule. Most beggars I have seen had their heads bowed in shame. Some emotional states can be easily faked. But it is very difficult to fake abject despair and humiliation.

But the worst response to beggars I know of is when they are run out of town for spoiling the view for the more privileged. Palmerston North City Council provoked outrage when it proposed keeping beggars out of town during the 2011 Rugby World Cup. And Auckland Council has aimed to remove the homeless from the streets by 2020. Although neither of these compare with Delhi's and Rio de Janeiro's destruction of whole communities of its very poorest in preparation for the 2010 Commonwealth and 2016 Olympic Games respectively.

So, how do I personally respond to beggars? Nowhere near as generously as I think I should be. I sometimes give them a gold coin, or something to eat. And often a silent prayer when I walk past.

If we look to see what the scriptures have to say about begging, there are very few references to begging in the Older Testament. The Law

made excellent provision for redistributing wealth to meet the needs of the poor. (It turns out we did not invent social welfare in Aotearoa New Zealand after all, even if we did pioneer the modern welfare state!)

But by Jesus' time, there was a very different political structure in place. Palestine was now occupied territory, and the halcyon days of Israel's golden age were well and truly ancient history. Beggars were now present in abundance, and it is worth noting that those whom Jesus encountered inevitably seemed to be begging because they were sick, indicating society's most vulnerable inhabitants were not being cared for adequately. And that sounds depressingly familiar.

Today's gospel reading is the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. This parable is only found in the Gospel according to St Luke. It is said to be based on an Egyptian folk tale, but we cannot be certain of this.

The story is quite straightforward. We have a rich man. Not just rich, but very rich: only the exceedingly wealthy could afford to wear purple. And we have a very poor man at his gate, whom he ignores. When they have both died, their positions have reversed. The poor man finds himself in a place of comfort, while the rich man finds himself in a place of torment. And it would seem that it was his greed that got him there.

This was a very political message that directly challenged those in power. In Jesus' day, wealth was seen as being a sign of blessing from God. But Jesus was unequivocal in his teaching that following him required sharing riches with those in need, a theme echoed in today's epistle reading from the First Letter of St Paul to Timothy, which explicitly states, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil".¹

At the very heart of Jesus' teachings are two simple commandments: to love God, and to love others.² He also said, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets".³ In the Older Testament, these two commandments are in completely separate books. It took Jesus to bring them together, and show that it is through loving others that we can demonstrate we love God. But by failing to follow these two simple commandments, we are rejecting Jesus' pivotal teaching and rejecting God's grace.

Some Christians are too busy judging people on the basis of their religion, their politics, or their sexual orientation, to even notice the serious moral offence of some of God's children going hungry.

Some Christians make noises about social justice issues, but seem to do little to match their words with deeds.

Some Christians, especially in those churches that teach the dreadful doctrine of prosperity theology, even seem to believe their riches are a reward from God that they are not obliged to share.

And some Christians even criticise other Christians who try to uphold Jesus' unequivocal teachings about money and social justice issues, accusing them of being "divisive" and "too political".

I know I personally do not uphold the standards demanded by the gospels. I have a family to help support, and I do not think would not make myself very popular at home if I sold everything we owned and gave the money to the poor. But I do not believe God expects me to sacrifice my own family's needs. It is one thing for me to make

sacrifices that only affect me. It is another thing to make sacrifices that impact on others.

And while I could try to excuse myself on the basis that the man in today's gospel reading was very rich, which I am not, the fact remains I am still very wealthy when compared with your average homeless person.

So why do I bother? Why do I still give the occasional donation to beggars when I know this falls well short of what Jesus taught?

It is not to make myself a holy person, because I know I will never be holy in this life.

And neither is it to meet any perceived Christian obligations, because giving out of a sense of requirement means nothing.

I give the occasional humble donation to beggars because I want to help them in some little way. I would really love to be able to do more to help the world's poor, both at home and overseas, and while I am sometimes embarrassed by how little I do give beggars, I am comforted by the knowledge that if others would do the same, then some of God's children will not go hungry that day.

So is my Christian walk is a journey in vain, given I am not fully living up to the gospels? I don't think so. I believe the gospels describe a model for ethical behaviour that only Jesus has attained to date, but anticipates how people will treat each other in the kingdom to come.

The fact I am never going to achieve perfection in this life should not stop me from doing what little things I can do to help bring about the coming of God's kingdom. But until that happens, our streets will continue to host beggars.

It is not our place to judge or make assumptions about them. And if we can see the Christ in them, they may just see the Christ in us.

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<http://theword.tk>

¹ 1 Timothy 6:10

² Matthew 22:37-39

³ Matthew 22: 40