

# 'Stuffed and Starved' and Seeing Lazarus

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 29 September, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 16 C

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 6:19-31

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0o\\_COS5k\\_-Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0o_COS5k_-Y)

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Jesus' story of the poor man and Lazarus is a tale of inequality, and a tale of unavoidable connection between wealth and poverty; between having too much and not having enough.

A few years ago I heard academic and activist Raj Patel speak about his book *Stuffed and Starved*. The subtitle: *markets, power and the hidden battle for the world food system*.

A child of Indian migrants, Raj grew up living above his parents' convenience store in London, so the irony of going on to be a person who wrote about food was not lost on him. He went on to be educated at Oxford, the London School of Economics and gained a doctorate from Cornell University.

*Stuffed and Starved* began with the disturbing fact that today, when the world produces more food than ever before, more than one in ten people are hungry. The hunger of 800 million people happens at the same time as another historical first: that the hungry are outnumbered by the one billion people on this planet who have more than enough and are overweight.

Raj Patel believes that global hunger and obesity are symptoms of the same problem. He believes that the route to eradicating world hunger is also the way to prevent global epidemics of diabetes and heart disease, and to address a host of environmental and social ills.

Overweight and hungry people are linked, he claims, through the chains of production that bring food from the fields to our plates. Guided by the profit motive, the corporations that sell our food shape and constrain what we eat, and how we think about food.

Patel's hypothesis is that 800 million starving, and 1 billion obese or unhealthy because of a diet of highly processed food, is inevitable in the logic of market capitalism, where a small number of corporations control the entire food growing, distribution, and selling network.

Poor people are squeezed for every hour of labour, and rich countries are squeezed for every dollar they will spend, leading to an efficient system that runs poor farmers to the edge of starvation, and markets high-fat, cheaply made, poisonous food to the rest of us.

Patel marshals an extraordinary range of evidence to show how this works at every level, and he also shows where the soft underbelly of this system is susceptible to positive change by grass roots movements.

Patel came to this work because of first caring about the forces of globalisation and the impact that that was having on the poor of the world. He had worked on issues of poverty and hunger and had met members of Via Campesina, the international movement that has a membership of over a hundred million middle-scale producers, agricultural workers, small-scale farmers, rural women and indigenous communities.

Through them and their stories, he became aware of some of the horrors associated with the global agricultural market. In Colombia, for example, people were gunned down for supporting the rights of migrant farm workers. In India, large numbers of farmers commit suicide because the agricultural policies leave them so impoverished. Immigrant communities in Britain, where he is from, were also more systematically likely to have a child going to bed hungry than white families in Britain.

In Australia 3 million people are living below the poverty line, including 739,000 children, primarily because of the cruel levels of Newstart and Youth Allowance.

Raj Patel doesn't demonise the international food industry but points out that companies like Nestle and Unilever are simply behaving according to the rules of the market.

It isn't that strange that Unilever owns both the ice-cream brand, Ben and Jerry's, and the diet food company SlimFast. These are just the rules of the game. The market at work. Part of good business. (SlimFast and Ben and Jerry's reminds me of the short-lived production a few years ago, I think that wasn't sold here, but of a product called Coke Plus: Coca Cola enriched with vitamins and minerals!)

Raj Patel believes that the world also needs to understand how its human instincts have been captured by the food industry, and how, through political engagement, we can connect with our food in new ways.

As much as he does not shame the global food industry, neither does he shame western people for eating food that is bad for us, bad for the poor, and bad for the planet. But, instead, he invites us to everyday heroism.

Part of that means understanding how we got here, and that we know what to change in the choices that we make.

In telling the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus was making the same point about money that Patel makes about food. Jesus identified the world's great idol as Mammon (by which he meant money and property in general, but also Mammon as a power no longer under human control and no longer in the service of human needs.) The out of control system of money globally has a strong correlation to the out of control system of food. For Jesus, the chief manifestation of the god Mammon is accumulated wealth, financial obesity.

So we have this memorable story of the rich man who "*feasted sumptuously every day*," just as most of us do, while poor Lazarus was lucky to beat the dogs to the rubbish. When Lazarus dies, we discover him safe in the arms of Abraham, while the rich man cries out in torment from Hades in the underworld. (Luke 16:19-31).

This account is not the usual pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die argument in which the poor are lulled into acquiescence with the hope of a heavenly reversal. On the contrary, it demonstrates the impossibility of salvation for those who promote a situation which causes inequities, and those who gorge themselves on the illicit fruits of their injustice.

This lack of salvation is not caused by God's punishment but by the choices made by the wealthy.

The most telling thing about the rich man was that he lived in a way that made him unable to see Lazarus. Unable to see Lazarus - who was right in front of him.

Our challenge too, is to see Lazarus in our time, and it is perhaps harder, for we live in a society that often puts distance between us and the local and global poor.

The gospel story is, at heart, not a story about eternal life and punishment. It is a reminder that we are all connected. Poverty and riches are interconnected, as are hunger and obesity and ill-health. The day to day decisions that individuals, corporations, and governments make may be the difference between life and death for millions of people.

At some level, we are all in Thomas Merton's words "guilty bystanders". Guilty bystanders whose ordinary choices have consequences far beyond what we can imagine in the present moment.

In the world of followers of the way-of-Jesus, there is no-one who is "other." Lazarus and the rich man both need each other in order to experience the fullness of God's presence.

If any are lost, all are diminished. With fear and with trembling, we are called to work for the salvation of all creation through our acts of justice, our reflection and understanding of the system that perpetuates it.

Progressive faith is, I believe, a resource for transformation of the individual and the world, so all of us are not oblivious to the need of others, so that we see Lazarus.

Thinking and living as a progressive person of faith, connected to a faith community such as this, is also about being in a context where we can explore together new ways of living, and to understand the ways that we live - differently - as sacred tasks.

This is one of the gifts that members of Pitt Street Earthweb give to us...the opportunity to be a community of solidarity and resistance in relation to care for the earth and its creatures.

Transformation of our minds and healing of our values is always possible.

The issue is our perception of abundance and scarcity.

Do we live in a closed, zero sum world in which our neighbour's gain is our loss, or an open system in which new possibilities and energies are constantly emerging?

When we know that we are connected with Divine Presence, in our gratitude, we can allow the riches of life - material and relational - to flow through us toward our neighbour.

At the deepest level, our lives can be understood as an ongoing and constant response to God's impulse towards beauty, justice, and wholeness: including the most mundane tasks of life, embracing the choice of where we buy our food and how we relate to it.

Trust is also at the heart of Jeremiah's improbable real estate investment. With the nation in ruin, Jeremiah takes a leap of faith – he buys a plot of land. No doubt observers think that the prophet is mad.

But Jeremiah sees history from the perspective of divine shalom and justice, not economic competition or political scarcity. Oppression and violence, racism, misogyny, and homophobia, will not last forever. The divine dream of peace will come to pass.

Such affirmations are challenging in the best of times – but particularly in difficult times. When our world seems to be going in the wrong direction, when right wing populism shapes our global relationships; or closer to home when, in our personal lives, we experience stress or illness or grief.

But the loving impulse of Sacred Energy invites us to look beyond the limits of the present moment toward the horizon of divine possibility. The impossible possibility at such moments is that the Sacred has not forgotten us but is still at work in our lives; that our lives, that all lives, are eternally treasured in the memory of God. Our lifetime on this good and beautiful earth is an adventure of companionship with one another – and with the Creative One.

We dwell in God's presence and God is constantly presenting us with bountiful possibilities for wholeness - even as we struggle with violence, greed, war, and fear.

Trouble is real.

Death and defeat are indeed possible.

But in faith we claim that nothing can deter God's vision of justice,

peace, and

beauty.