

Role Reversal

[Luke 16: 19 - 31]

Lazarus let his failing limbs relax as he slid down to a sitting position by the gate post. Turning his head sideways, he laid his parched tongue against the damp wall and feebly licked the moisture. He was barely conscious now and almost oblivious to the sounds of the evening. Blazing lights from the house beyond the gates only cast long shadows around where he lay. He summoned strength to kick out at a dog which tried to lick the sores on his legs, then he lay still, exhausted, gasping for breath. Above the shouts of the street and the baying of a pack of scavenging dogs, Lazarus could hear the sound of music and dancing from the house. He had come, as he had most nights for many years, hoping that the master of the house would notice and send out some scraps of food. That was a rare occurrence and this night Lazarus had no stomach for food. Dives, the master of the house, had been more generous in former years. After all, he and Lazarus had grown up together in the town. As his wealth increased his life of luxury separated him further and further from people like Lazarus. In a similar way Lazarus' misfortune and disability had widened the gap between them and taken him further into poverty, begging and petty crime. The gulf between the two men was so wide now that Dives couldn't, or wouldn't even see across it.

Lazarus' lay still. His breathing gradually became shallower until it ceased altogether. It so happened that that very night, Dives' decadent living got the better of him and his heart failed. There was a most elaborate funeral next day. That was after two of his servants had gone to the tip with what the dogs had left of Lazarus.

On the other side of life, things were very different. Lazarus awoke to find himself in heaven and in the presence of good kind people. Abraham himself was at his side to comfort him. Dives however found himself in that place we call hell, where reality catches up with us and memory and conscience burn into us like a raging fire. Dives could see Lazarus. In his agony he called out to Abraham. *Send Lazarus with some water!* Lazarus noted that he was still expected to wait on the once rich man.

Suddenly a picture of Lazarus by the wall last night flashed into Dives' mind as he heard Abraham say, *Where were you with drinks of water when Lazarus was licking the wall, in pain, homeless, despised and excluded. Your selfishness and greed blinded you to poverty and the needs of others. I am sure Lazarus would bring you water from the ditch he drank from, but there is no way across from here to where you are.*

For the first time in ages, Dives began to think of others. He called out to Abraham again. *Please. I have five brothers still at home. I don't want them to end up like this. Let Lazarus go back and warn them.* Abraham told Dives that it does not work like that. *Would they listen to Lazarus?* he asked. *Even if he came back from the dead? They have the message of the law from Moses and the words of the prophets, They warn them clearly. If they can't heed that, then no amount of heavenly visits will convince them. Let them read the scriptures and learn that it is in the life they live now that heaven and hell are made.*



[The story is not intended to give detail of the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell. It tells us clearly that heaven is to be with the Lord, hell is to be without him. Jesus was saying – you make heaven and hell now. If the Kingdom of heaven is in our lives, then we shall be in the Kingdom always.]