

Views from the Pews – The stone that the builders rejected

Psalm 118:22 declares that ‘the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone’. Then and ever since, oppressed and rejected people have dreamed of how to achieve national and personal recognition, and even to turn the tables on those who once gave them a hard time. The Magnificat, sung at every Anglican Evensong, claims that God ‘hath put down the mighty from their seat/ and hath exalted the humble and meek/. He hath filled the hungry with good things/and the rich he hath sent empty away.’

These are radical statements whose impact is blunted by long familiarity, yet they imply that the Incarnation will eventually bring about some revolutionary reversals of fortunes. They reflect Mary’s confidence that human errors and misjudgements will eventually be corrected by God. How often, as we sing these time-hallowed words, do we think about what they really mean? Jesus put the idea into personal human terms.

Luke (16:29-31) cites a story he told about how a rich man enjoyed the good life on earth, ignoring Lazarus, a poor beggar, lying at his gate hungry and covered with sores while the rich man feasted. After death, they found themselves in completely opposite positions.

The rich man had avoided the consequences of his selfishness during his lifetime, but in due course the bill became due, and he found himself pitched from easy comfort into a torment of flames and thirst. This radical and unexpected change in his situation can be seen as a form of ‘payment deferred’. By contrast, Lazarus was lifted by angels to sit beside Abraham.

The rich man pleaded with Abraham to allow Lazarus to bring him water, but the gulf between the two of them made that impossible. So, the rich man tried to persuade Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his still living brothers of what might happen to them.

Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

As Peter declared in Acts 4: 11, Jesus was the stone that the contemporary authorities rejected, yet he became the cornerstone of the future Church.

Kim King