

I started smoking when I was 21 and continued for 17 years. *During that time, I heard warnings about the dire effects of smoking, I knew that I could get lung cancer and even if I didn't I was ruining my health. But I continued to smoke. I was sure that I would stop one day but it isn't easy, and though I tried a few times I didn't manage. It took moving to where hardly anyone I knew was smoking, and falling in love with someone whose lungs couldn't manage smoke before I stopped. All the government warnings and scientific information about the hazards of smoking had little effect.

It was like that for the rich man in Jesus' story. *He was a conspicuous consumer who wore the most expensive designer clothes and ate only the finest food, and a lot of it. If he had paid any attention in the synagogue he probably knew that this wasn't the way things were meant to be. *Moreover, a poor and unclean man had been placed at the gates to his enclave, and eastern hospitality expected that he would be merciful to him. Obviously, he knew about Lazarus because he knows his name. This rich consumer knew that from both a religious and a cultural perspective he should be caring for the man at the gate but he didn't bother. Like me and cigarettes. I knew the right and healthy thing to do but I didn't do it.

*The rich man didn't do anything for Lazarus but the dogs came and licked his sores. Dog saliva was known to be beneficial for wounds and sores, so there is a contrast here between the behavior of the rich man and the behavior of the local stray dogs. Jesus is really laying it on thick in this parable.

And when both characters die, Jesus continues his topsy-turvy inversion of the way we normally see things – Lazarus, the homeless guy who sat by the side of the road looking like a heap of rags and probably creating insanitary conditions – Lazarus is carried away by angels into the bosom of Abraham whereas the rich man with his big house and sparkling kitchens, he just died and was buried.*

It wasn't until Mr. Conspicuous Consumer died that he fully realized the error of his ways. Now he can't escape the fact that he was behaving immorally. We don't need to take this picture of the afterlife literally, any more than we take the Greek myth of Orpheus going into the underworld seriously. This is a parable. And in the parable he thinks that if someone comes back from the dead to warn his brothers they will pay attention but Abraham responds that if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets they won't listen to someone coming back from the dead. Of course, there is dramatic irony here for those of us who are reading these stories so much later – we know that a man called Lazarus was revived by Jesus after his body had been in the tomb long enough to start decaying, and we also know that Jesus himself would be resurrected. But he suggests that people who ignored the law and the prophets would ignore his own teachings as well.

So why didn't Conspicuous Consumer do the right thing and care for Lazarus? And why didn't I do the right thing and stop smoking?*

There were probably many personal reasons why I started and then continued to smoke even after I developed a smoker's cough. But all the arguments against smoking were not enough to persuade me to stop just like the law and the prophets were not enough to persuade Conspicuous Consumer to change. I think there are two reasons – one, that I enjoyed smoking and was of course addicted to the nicotine and two, that I couldn't imagine the lung cancer etc would happen to me. Maybe Conspicuous Consumer thought he would get around to caring for Lazarus at some point, but there was plenty of time to be a philanthropist later.

Our brains are hard-wired to deal with the immediate pleasure, the immediate danger. We know all about fight or flight when the *sabre tooth tiger appears. But it is much harder for us humans to respond to a future danger, to take seriously the possibility of lung cancer or hellfire. Scientists have known since the 1970s that burning fossil fuels would

most likely lead to climate change but we humans are only beginning to get the message. We are only beginning to take it seriously.

*And we are still intent on somehow keeping our current standard of living, our corporate profits, our immediate need for re-election – we are still intent on keeping smoking, keeping consuming beyond our needs, because these things feel good and what can one person, one politician, one country do anyway?

We have seen some terrible disasters this year – the man-made war in Ukraine is dwarfed by the flooding in Pakistan which left a third of the country under water and is displaced over 30 million people. Even as we speak the Philippines are being hit by a massive storm bringing winds of 125 miles per hour. And in other parts of the world, severe drought is leading to crop failures and disrupting food supply. According to the World Food Programme¹ 828 million people go to bed hungry every night and 50 million people are on the brink of starvation. That's about as many people as live in the whole of California, Oregon and Washington state combined. That many people are on the brink of dying of hunger.

That's difficult to hear, it's difficult to comprehend. *I'd rather change the channel and watch a good show.

People of God, we are the rich man in this parable. We are the ones who have more than we need and go on collecting and consuming more than our fair share of the planet's resources. We are the ones ignoring the poor man or woman at the gate, those living at the threshold of our awareness.

*Climate change is real. It is here, it is now, and it is affecting the poor of the world before it affects the rich. Yet our patterns of consumption continue to contribute to the emissions which make it worse every day.

¹ <https://www.wfp.org/global-hunger-crisis>

That is the bad news. *The good news is that we serve a God of resurrection, a God whose love sustains us even in the worst of times. A God who encourages us and directs us to live our lives caring for the people at our gates, at the margins of society, remembering that we are stewards of creation and living lightly on the planet, finding ways to reduce our use of scarce resources so that there will be more for others, and not just for humanity but for all creatures.

Even though it is tempting to go away from here and carry on as usual, let us not be hearers of the word only, but doers also. When we talk about climate change we remind ourselves and others that it is real, it is not a vague threat but a right in our face emergency; when we raise awareness through talking, *writing to the editor, calling or emailing our representatives, we are making a difference. We are contributing our small part in the creation of the realm of God.

We can support one another in taking this crisis seriously, in living simply and lightly. *As we live based not only on the law and the prophets but on Jesus' teaching, together we become a community of resistance, refusing to live lives of consumption but rather lives of deepening compassion where we share what we have with each other and with those beyond our walls.

In the divine economy, as we give so we receive and there is enough to go round.

Please turn with me to the second reading and let us pray the final paragraph together:*

When our use of this world is over and we make room for others, may we not leave anything ravished by our greed or spoiled by our ignorance, but may we hand on our common heritage fairer and sweeter through our use of it, undiminished in fertility and joy, that so our bodies may return in peace to the great mother who nourished them and our spirits may round the circle of a perfect life in thee. Amen