

“Downward Journeys”

(Luke 10: 25-37)

*A reflection on the call of Jesus to dedicate our lives to the poor
with examples from Nicaragua*

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In 2001 I had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land. Having been from Jerusalem to Jericho it became much easier to imagine the story of the Good Samaritan which Jesus tells in Luke Chapter 10. The parable says he went *down* from Jerusalem to Jericho and those that have been there will know that it really is ‘down’ from Jerusalem at 2500 ft to Jericho which is 800 ft below sea level. This is barren and hostile terrain and, at the time of Jesus’ story, was bandit country, as it still is today. The man was making a difficult journey in difficult terrain. But it is on this journey having been beaten up by thieves that the man encounters a true neighbour, and an unexpected one.



The view over Wadi Qelt, on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho

I want to share some thoughts from this parable and tell you about some other difficult downward journeys from my experience in Nicaragua. I hope that this will help us to discover something about the compassion of Jesus towards the poor and how this might be expressed in practical ways.

The context of this story in Luke 10 is that of a lawyer asking a question to test Jesus. It is similar to the context of the story of the rich ruler in Luke 18; both ask exactly the same question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus’ initial response is the same in both cases: he refers them to the law. They both know this well and feel in their own hearts that they are good, law-abiding people and keen members of their local congregations. Maybe they are both saying that they have done an Alpha course, joined a home group, go to church twice on Sunday and tithe their income. It doesn’t really matter whether their external religiosity is for ‘show’ or whether they are committed believers; the fact is they seemed to be able to tick all the boxes, like many of us perhaps.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenges the lawyer to think about a tricky question – taking the lawyer on, on his own turf, so to speak. In the story of the Rich Ruler, Jesus is more direct, challenging the ruler on the one thing that is closest to him – his money: “You still lack one

thing. Sell a tenth of what you have and give to the church...?” No! “Sell *everything* you have and give to the *poor*, and you will have treasure in heaven”.

I think we like to take passages like this and draw out ‘spiritual’ messages. We like to think this is about letting go of the things closest to us. Perhaps I can have some prayer ministry to make me feel more comfortable that the wealth I still have is not actually binding me? But if we follow this approach in the story of the rich ruler, the poor are reduced to nothing more than recipients of the excess wealth of those who need to shed the things which are binding them spiritually.

I don’t think that is Jesus’ intention in either of these stories. Rather, I think he is opening up to the lawyer and the rich ruler a world of need ‘out there’. Their lives have been wrapped up in their own worlds of religious ritual and adherence to the law and it hasn’t even occurred to them that the world of need beyond their front door is an issue for them.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, we see Jesus using the poor man as the focus of the story (he has a name) while the nameless rich man suffers in hell appealing to Lazarus to help him. Have you ever wondered why it is assumed that the rich man will go to hell? In Luke 16:22 we read “The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment...” Don’t you think this is a bit of a non sequitur? And have you noticed that Jesus didn’t describe him as “the greedy rich man” or “the selfish rich man”? It is as if he was in hell because he was rich. I’m sure we can come up with plenty of alternative explanations, but is it not possible that the rich man was in hell because he had luxurious wealth whilst Lazarus, covered in sores, sat at his gate?

We may not want to take these words of Jesus too literally, but it is important to understand that the poor themselves often understand these words very literally indeed! An important influence in the history of the church in Latin America, and Nicaragua in particular, was that of liberation theology. Despite all the associations with revolutionary movements and Marxist politics, the fundamental principle of liberation theology was that the poor themselves should be free to read, understand and interpret scripture for themselves, without having it interpreted for them by the rich and middle class priests and pastors. And when you allow poor and marginalised working class people to connect directly with the words of the poor and marginalised carpenter from Nazareth, without them being filtered through the supposedly superior theological understanding of the Church, the results can seem rather threatening to those with wealth and resources. To them, the fact that Jesus was a carpenter is incredibly important. He was one of them, quite unlike the priests, pastors and missionaries today who like to tell the poor how they should be interpreting the Bible.

In Matthew 25, Jesus gives a very stark message about the separation of the sheep and the goats. How is it that they will be separated? Is it according to those who have prayed the prayer in the back of the ‘Why Jesus?’ booklet? Or those who have been ‘born again’ or who speak in tongues, or who have been baptised? No! It is those who fed the hungry, gave the thirsty a drink, cared for the sick, welcomed the strangers and visited the prisoners who go to heaven. Is this salvation by works, then? No. It may not be what defines you as a follower of Jesus, but what identifies you as a Christian is what you do for those in need. Some commentators have argued that this passage isn’t really about serving the poor. They say that when Jesus talks about “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” he is actually implying that this is about those who looked after his disciples, not the poor in general. So the acts of service to the disciples were ways of demonstrating agreement with Jesus’ message and thus those who go to heaven are those who accept Jesus’ message and this passage has nothing whatever to do with serving the poor. You can make up your own mind, but I think it is interesting that we seem so desperate to ‘theologise’ away any of the direct challenges which Jesus makes to those of us with wealth.

I believe Jesus’ challenge to the rich ruler is meant to make us uncomfortable: “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”.

So it is important to see that in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, he is opening the eyes of the lawyer to a world of need he previously didn't regard as his concern or relate in any way to his spiritual life. The really shocking part, though, was not that. Jesus did not arbitrarily use a story of a man who did a kind deed helping the victim by the roadside. Instead he chose the most taboo-busting and culturally shocking example he could think of: a Samaritan. This story loses its power to us today in a way, because we have come to associate 'Samaritan' with all things good – there is a charity set up using that name and it has entered the popular vocabulary as a name for people who reach out in compassion to someone in need. That wasn't Jesus' idea in this parable. The name Samaritan was meant to shock. In the eighties there was a popular contemporary sketch of the Good Samaritan by the Riding Lights Theatre Company called "The Good Punk-Rocker" which tried to make this point in a very 'eighties' context.

Eleven years ago I had the privilege of spending a few months in India in the northern state of Rajasthan. I stayed with a high caste Hindu family and visited a number of different projects run by local charities in the area. On one visit I was out in the desert in a remote community where a temporary eye clinic had been set up. There were several large marquees and people who needed cataract operations had been brought from all the surrounding villages. The organisers had invited a few eye surgeons up from Delhi and they carried out 400 operations in the space of a couple of days. I visited the day after the surgeons had left and was shown around the marquee where hundreds of patients were recovering, bandages over their eyes. It was all rather embarrassing as I was somehow being regarded as a VIP, but what amazed me about the whole thing was that this was an entirely local initiative. There was no international aid agency in sight. The communities themselves provided all the beds and blankets to take care of the patients.

I spoke with the local man who had organised the clinic and told him, for what it was worth, how impressed I was. He just smiled graciously, lowered his eyes in embarrassment and, pointing with his finger to the sky, said that this was not his work, but rather the work of God. I was very moved by my encounter with this man and left with a sense that God had been powerfully at work.

It wasn't until we were driving away that I stopped and thought – this man was a Hindu! And yet I had felt a deep sense of spiritual connection with what I had seen. I have been processing that experience and its significance ever since. But I wonder if the most appropriate equivalent of the Good Samaritan for a Christian audience today might be "The Good Hindu" or the "The Good Muslim".



Don Bernabé (right) talks with Arturo Juárez of Nuevas Esperanzas

I will come back to the rest of the parable later but I would like to tell you about some more downward journeys. I want to tell you about Don Bernabé. He is someone who is very used to making downward journeys. He is a humble and gentle man with a strong faith and is the leader of a small community which is situated high up on the slopes of one of Nicaragua's most active volcanoes, Volcán Telica. Don Bernabé and his family have had land on the slopes of this volcano for generations. They are true *campesinos*. This Spanish word doesn't have a good translation in English but it describes those who live on and farm their own land. They typically have simple lifestyles and a close

relationship with the land. In this case they live in a very remote setting with no electricity, water, or access by vehicles. The biggest challenge facing this community, and the reason why we have been working with them, is water. There are no wells, springs, streams or rivers and during the five month long dry season this community has to travel all the way down the mountain on horseback to a spring to collect water. It is a four hour round trip. From our survey of this community we have estimated that the average consumption of water is about 13 litres per person per day, well below international minimum standards, but not surprising when the journey to collect the water is so long. Our work with this community involved the construction of a large rainwater harvesting system at the school with capacity to store water for use during the dry season in a large tank.



Clockwise from top left: the school at El Ojochal; Volcán Telica in eruption; the rainwater harvesting system built by the community with assistance from Nuevas Esperanzas; children often have responsibility for collecting water on horseback.

But what can we *really* do for a community like this? They are resilient and on the whole contented and happy. Are they poor? And if so, in what way? I love being up there on the hillside with them. I have learned a lot from their resilience and ingenuity and the uncluttered lifestyle they have. In many ways I feel like they are not the ones who are poor. And I also ask myself, what ‘development’ will bring to a community like this. I am very aware that we could do more harm than good. So for Don Bernabé and the community of El Ojochal, the journey is down the side of a volcano and it is all about water. But this downward journey is also a humbling example for us which poses challenging questions about concepts such as poverty, wealth, need and plenty.

The next downward journey is a difficult and sad one. This is the story of Irene del Carmen, a 23 year old mother of two. Her story begins in the Matagalpa, in the north of Nicaragua, in the coffee-growing highlands. Much of the economy of Nicaragua depends on coffee. The coffee industry hit a major crisis in 2000 when the bottom fell out of the market. Most of the coffee plantations in the



From top: coffee prices fell to a quarter of their previous value in 2000; the coffee refugees lived in very poor conditions at La Palmerita; now aged nine, Daniel (right) was just three when he arrived; the only water source was this contaminated well

north of Nicaragua are owned by relatively wealthy landowners; the coffee workers themselves lived on the plantations in poor conditions with no land rights. When the coffee price fell, the landowners could no longer afford to pay the workers to pick the coffee and many worked for nothing for a year or more; others were able to work in exchange for food. As the crisis deepened the landowners took out loans they could not repay, mortgaging their properties. The banks repossessed the farms and drove the coffee workers off the property. They were left jobless and homeless. To make their voice heard they went on a march, ending up in the capital Managua where they held demonstrations in front of the National Assembly during presidential elections. The politically expedient solution from the then president was to give the coffee workers a piece of land near León called La Palmerita. The ‘coffee refugees’, as they became known, came down from the north from a much cooler climate, to settle on this barren piece of land on the hot plain near León with nothing.

We first encountered the coffee refugees five years ago when they came with their families to start a new life at La Palmerita armed with all sorts of promises from the government of assistance which never amounted to anything. These people were not really *campesinos* like my previous story, but *jornaleros*, which basically means people who work for a daily wage. They have a semi-nomadic existence moving around to wherever they can find work and have learned lots of survival techniques. Sometimes this involves picking coffee; sometimes they can sell tortillas on the streets of the cities. But sometimes they had to survive by begging, stealing or prostituting themselves or their children. Family structures are very loose and stable relationships are not the norm. Once when we did a census of the community we discovered that there were no girls over the age of 14 who did not have children.

Our initial work with the community consisted of addressing immediate needs. They were using a contaminated well which we cleaned up and as many of the children were malnourished we were able to administer a World Food Programme project providing for the immediate survival needs. Following the old adage that it is better to

teach someone how to fish than to give them a fish, we followed a natural progression from food handouts to agricultural assistance helping the community to grow sesame as a cash crop as well as corn and vegetables for subsistence. But this is still a very psychologically, socially and spiritually damaged community. We started planning for the future, working with the community to decide how the land should be divided up and where the houses they longed for would be built. We faced numerous legal setbacks in trying to make the government honour their most fundamental promise of land rights for the coffee workers, but the poor living conditions persisted for more than five years as the families continued to live in black plastic shelters.

It was during this time that Irene came down from Matagalpa to live at La Palmerita. Her mother had come and settled earlier but she continued to live in very poor conditions in the north, until she was admitted to hospital in Matagalpa with tuberculosis and hepatitis A. Nicaragua's health service is desperately under-resourced and diagnosis is often too late. The hospital in Matagalpa apparently wanted to move her on, to be cared for by her family, so they sent her to La Palmerita to live with her mother. We first got to hear about Irene when the community at La Palmerita wrote to me asking for help with a coffin. As Irene was still alive, I was dumbfounded by this request. But as tuberculosis is considered highly infectious and a lot of fear surrounds the disease, the health service said that the family would have to bury her within 24 hours of her death. This is actually not true as infectious diseases are virtually never transmitted by dead bodies, but this all seemed rather ridiculous to us as Irene was still alive! We contacted the best doctor we knew in León, who had treated me for dengue fever a few years ago and he agreed to treat her for no charge so long as we could provide the medicines and nursing care she needed. He told us that the worst condition she was suffering from was malnutrition and that it was because of this that she had no resistance to fight the other infections. He treated her with intensive feeding but a week later, she died.

Her death certificate says that she died of TB, a preventable infectious disease, but notes that she was acutely malnourished. This is, of course, also preventable. It also notes several underlying conditions. She had hepatitis A – preventable and often related to poor sanitation. She had malaria – also preventable. I think that the death certificate should actually read that the underlying cause of her death was poverty. And the underlying cause of that? How about our indifference to the numerous preventable diseases which would not kill you or me? So at 23, Irene died leaving two young children to grow up with their grandmother in the squalid conditions at La Palmerita.

After many years trying to be advocates (but mostly failing) for the people at La Palmerita we heard last November that there was some money available to build the first 112 houses and within 24 hours of the funding being approved we had the contractors out on site, working with the community members to build the first phase of houses. The prefabricated houses went up very quickly and after two and half months, all 112 houses were completed. For now, the housing



Construction of houses at La Palmerita – after waiting for six years in black plastic shelters, 112 houses were built in less than three months. Living conditions have dramatically improved but much more needs to be done for this to become a self-sufficient, thriving community.

project is finished and everyone's spirits have been lifted. But we still have to build latrines for all these houses and are looking for funds to complete this work. This is really important, and far more important than medical interventions, in reducing infectious diseases like Hepatitis A, one of the diseases that Irene died from.

The journey of Irene from the coffee-growing highlands of Nicaragua down to the resettlement project in the hot dust-bowl of La Palmerita was tragically her last. Her final journey unmasks the cruel and unjust face of poverty. And as this 'Lazarus', the scandal of fatal but preventable disease, sits at *our* doorstep, how do *we* respond?

My next downward journey is more of a spiritual one, but to understand this journey you need to have an idea of the 'spiritual landscape' in Nicaragua.

The church in Nicaragua is in a bit of a state. "Everyone knows how to play at being Christian in Nicaragua", commented some friends who visited us recently. Almost everyone professes a faith and some estimates suggest that about half go to church. There is a church on almost every corner. However, the denominational divides are very deep between Catholics and Protestants and between the different protestant denominations. This has led to sectarianism within society at large. 'Conversion', in this context, often means switching denominations and people will be 'converted' as many times as you want them to be, especially when evangelistic campaigns are usually accompanied by some sort of free gift!

For the Catholics, Easter week is the most important time in the Church calendar. There are numerous processions throughout the city of León as the Catholics re-enact the movements of Jesus during the last week of his life. The routes of the processions are published in advance and this year, one of the Evangelical churches decided to hold an open air rally strategically placed to block one of the Catholic processions. They hired the largest PA system they could find, and as those on the procession tried to weave their way through the rally (which actually only consisted of a handful of elderly ladies), the Catholic Church and its 'idolatry' were denounced at volume from the loudspeakers.

In response to the numerous Catholic festivals throughout the year, the Evangelicals have instituted their own which marks the anniversary of the translation of the Bible into Spanish. A few years ago I attended the *Día de la Biblia* celebrations in León, which were held in the Central Park, right outside the Cathedral, during mass. Again, backed by a very loud PA system, several hundred Christians gathered to worship, waving their Bibles in the air. The doors of the cathedral were closed as the Catholics tried to celebrate mass with the commotion outside, but as the volume in the park rose, some of the Catholic congregation climbed to the top of the cathedral to ring its enormous bells, apparently in competition with the PA system. The din was awful! I stood at edge of the crowd watching this spectacle and thought to myself "How sad! What must onlookers who are trying to figure out what they think of Christianity make of all this?". So in this context, you can see that it is rather unusual to have a Christian organisation like Nuevas Esperanzas which includes both Catholics and Protestants.

San Jacinto, one of the communities where we work, has four churches and as a community shows all the symptoms of the sectarianism so common in Nicaragua. When we started to work in San Jacinto we heard of one lady from the Assemblies of God who regularly made visits to the Catholic Priest to cast out demons from him. Through a quirk of history, the land at San Jacinto is actually owned by the Catholic Church, so when one of the Evangelical churches organised an open air event, the committee from the Catholic church turned up to close it down saying they were on 'Catholic ground' and had no right to hold such an event.



Rainwater harvesting from the pilot project at San Jacinto in 2005 (clockwise from top left): plentiful rain falls during the wet season; rainwater harvested from roofs is collected in large tanks; this tank can store enough water to last through the dry season; at last, Luvy Vallejos has water at her own home!

So when the pastor of the Baptist Church had the idea that churches could harvest rainwater following the example of a pilot project we had implemented in the community in 2005, we saw a great opportunity, not only to work with the churches so that they could be involved in meeting the needs of community, but also to encourage the churches to work together. This was to be a first for this community and completely radical in a Nicaraguan context.

So we put together a proposal, raised funds from churches in the UK, and started building rainwater systems. The project required the co-operation of all four churches and meant that they had to be on speaking terms, even if it was just to ask to borrow a wheelbarrow. We set some slightly bigger challenges as the project progressed. For example, teams from each of the churches worked voluntarily on the construction at their churches whilst some of the women prepared refreshments for the workers. After persuading the churches that this was something they should do from their own resources without looking to us for money, we raised the stakes a little higher by suggesting that instead of providing food for their own work teams they should do so for all four churches. On one day of the week, the Baptists provided food for all the churches, on another day of the week it was the Catholics' turn, and so on. On the last day, we provided food. Despite initial resistance, the churches slowly began to open up through small acts of cooperation like this.

Alongside the building work, we ran a series of workshops and ecumenical activities, mixing up the denominations to build bridges. We also held a worship event for all the churches with music and dance and a few short messages. This had to be on 'neutral territory', so to speak, so we used the school. About 300 people attended which is more than 10% of the population; they had never had anything like it before in their community.

The whole thing was held together by Jorge, one of the leaders of our amazing Nicaraguan team who make all these projects a reality. He is an accomplished worship leader and lay preacher in the *Renovacion Carismatica*, the charismatic movement of the Catholic Church, and before he came to us was a teacher and radio presenter with his sights set on an international ministry as an itinerant preacher and musician. He had never worked outside his denomination before. This project with a small rural community was very different from his ‘high flying’ leadership ambitions, but Jorge began to see how the daily work with a poor community was in some ways more significant than the big events he had been used to, leading worship for 5000 people. Jorge took the pastors and priest on several retreats where they spent a lot of time listening to each other and praying together.

Towards the end of this challenging project three of the four water tanks were complete, but work got behind schedule at the Catholic Church and they started to find it hard to get their volunteers to show up for work. One of the most humbling things for me about this project was that it was the Baptist Pastor who stepped in and helped finish the tank. At the end of the project we had a special ceremony to bless the rainwater harvesting systems, but instead of each church having their own ceremony we went around all four churches as a group, with representatives from all the churches. At the Catholic Church, the Baptist pastor prayed a blessing in his own style, whilst a Pentecostal blessing was given at the next church, and so on. At the end we finished up at the Baptist Church where the Catholic priest, in full robes, blessed the tank, sprinkling holy water on its walls. This would never have been possible at the start of the project.

So this story has been about the spiritual journey for the church leaders at San Jacinto, humbling themselves from their denominational pride to work together and learning to see that there is so much more which unites us than which divides us. It was also a ‘downward journey’ for Jorge from his aspirations to have an international ministry, to this work with a small rural community, breaking down barriers between churches. Jorge has spoken and led worship in several Baptist and Pentecostal churches since and continues to look for ways to encourage unity and reconciliation between denominations.



From top: Jorge Murillo who led the church activities; a group of women from different denominations at one of the workshops; the tank at the Catholic church; (from left to right) the pastor of the Church of God of Prophecy, the Catholic priest, the Baptist pastor and the pastor of the Assemblies of God

The last downward journey I would like to share is my own. We left our home in Oxford to work in Nicaragua about four years ago. For many years I had prayed for an opportunity to work overseas to serve the poor. This had been my ambition since I first visited Africa in 1989. So when my wife and I finally left to work in Nicaragua in 2003, it was the fulfilment of a long-standing yearning for me. However, it wasn't plain sailing when we finally got there and things quite quickly started to become very difficult, particularly because of internal turmoil within the organisation with which we went overseas to work. After a difficult couple of years, this organisation announced that they would be 'ceasing operations' in Nicaragua.

This was a major disappointment, particularly because it left a lot of unfinished business. We had just spent two years qualifying for government funds to build houses at La Palmerita and we felt as if the rug had been pulled from underneath us. And so we were faced with a choice. In looking at all the issues, I started to ponder about my career. I tried to think of all the positives: "Oh well! At least I have been able to learn Spanish...it was a good learning experience...at least I've got a bit of overseas experience to put on my cv..." and so on.

There's a real sting in the tail in the story of the Good Samaritan. Have you noticed how Jesus answered the lawyer's question? After telling the story he asks a question of the lawyer: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer asked "Who is my neighbour?" but Jesus' reply took the whole emphasis away from the one asking the question and instead asked who was a neighbour to the one in need. The lawyer's point of reference is himself, but Jesus framed the question in a completely different way. It is as if he was saying to the lawyer "I don't care who you choose as the object of your charity. What matters to me is who will show compassion to the one in need." His heart is with the one in need, with the poor and the marginalised.

This really hit home to me as I realised that my attitude was completely wrong. The fact is that if we are to follow Jesus we have to stop using ourselves as the focus. The trouble with many churches, particularly in the Charismatic tradition, is that there is so much emphasis on *us* and our own spiritual growth. And so it is hard for us to process God's 'calling' without it being all about us. But we can't expect to discover the heart of Jesus for the poor by receiving prayer ministry for it – we need to get out there and get to know them, whether that be in our own towns or further afield. It should be the poor who set the agenda. We are simply the tool which God uses. If I really want to follow Jesus, my carefully planned career must go out the window! I think we have created a distorted Christianity which is sometimes reduced to nothing more than a self-help programme. But Jesus' challenge is a really tough one. We are called to abandon ourselves, and our careers, to follow Him.

The wording in Isaiah's passage about true fasting is powerful: "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you *spend yourselves* on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness..." This isn't about a little contribution in a special offering. What Jesus is asking us to do is to reorganise our entire lives so that we can serve those in need around us. We are called to a downward mobility, as Henri Nouwen put it, a completely radical concept that is counter to everything in our culture.

In the story of Esther, the beautiful young woman who finds herself in a position of influence with King Xerxes, at the point where she has the opportunity to prevent a holocaust, her uncle Mordecai tells her "if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" God's love and compassion for the poor does not depend on

us and our actions. He doesn't need to use us. It is the poor he is concerned for. But maybe he has brought us to a position where we might be used by him, especially if we are prepared to have our hearts broken by the needs around us.

We formed Nuevas Esperanzas in November 2005 when the previous organisation closed its operations because we felt driven to by the needs around us. The option of walking away wasn't really an option at all. We had many projects half-done. Promises made had been unfulfilled. There was work to do and the closure of one organisation was merely another challenge we had to face. We never expected to be setting up our own charity but that is where God has brought us. And as things have developed over the last year and half we have started to discover that we have a niche in the NGO world and a wonderful opportunity – our approach to working with churches is actually quite uncommon, but very much needed. It is sad that few, if any, Christian organisations which work with the poor in Nicaragua do so in a non-sectarian way. But our belief in our calling has started to grow.

So how will you respond? Have you let your heart be broken by the poor? Or do you not really know them? Are you on the path of downward mobility? Is God asking you to take a step down that path?

Perhaps you are afraid of what might happen if you were to release your life, your money, your skills or your possessions to serve those in need? Perhaps you need to confess that like the rich man, you have overlooked Lazarus at your gate? The challenge is there for all of us. How will you respond?