

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 16:19-31

(Jesus said to the Pharisees): "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'

He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house- for I have five brothers-that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' 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.'"

REFLECTION 1:

HEART DISEASE

It is well known in advertising circles that fund-raising drives get more money from a picture of a single starving child than from statistics about a million starving children. And today, Jesus, the master storyteller presents us with a word-photo of a starving Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31).

Jesus paints the rich man as a master of extravagant and conspicuous consumption and then point-for-point he contrasts the lives of the two main characters. The rich man dressed himself in fine linen and purple garments, while oozing sores provided the main colour one could find on Lazarus. While servants would have attended to the wealthy man's every whim, only animals could be found at Lazarus' side. The only comfort he got was from the passing dogs that licked his sores. The story invites us to picture lonely Lazarus breathing his last, only to be ushered by God's own messengers and granted a place of the greatest comfort and love imaginable.

In regard to the rich man, we hear only the blunt statement that he died and was buried. It was only after his comfortable life came to an end that the rich man began to notice Lazarus. Then from the netherworld the rich man took it for granted that he could preserve the privileges of his class distinctions. He demonstrated appropriate respect for Abraham and then assumed that the once overlooked Lazarus might just be there to replace the servants he had commandeered during his lifetime.

What a comedown he was in for! The time for reaching out and relating to another had come to an end. He had squandered his chance to enjoy the communion of heaven. He had spent a life without learning either to give or receive. The rich man had what Pope Francis would diagnose as a heart problem. In his first canonization ceremony, Pope Francis preached that 'comfortable living' can cause what he called 'gentrification of the heart'. That seems to have been the problem of the rich man in Jesus' story – he didn't think he was doing anything wrong, he was simply enjoying what came his way assured he had deserved it. One of the most eloquent of the Church Fathers, St. John Chrysostom wrote, 'Remember this without fail, that not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life – we do not possess our own wealth but theirs'.

Our world today might call this foolishness. Advertising is eager for us to focus on our own wants rather than another's need. Jesus today reminds us through our selected readings from Amos and Luke to open our eyes and our hearts to the needy at our door – be that the door of our nation, our neighbourhoods, our church or our home. Pope Francis calls us to consider how our affluence may cause us serious heart disease.

REFLECTION 2: 'ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN'

In the scene from the final Godfather movie, Michael Corleone makes his confession to a bishop. In the encounter (an open courtyard) the bishop takes a stone from a nearby fountain and breaking it open he shows the mafia boss that despite the stone's outer wetness, the interior remains bone dry. It was a demonstration to the penitent of how hard it is for God's mercy to penetrate the interior of a simple way of life.

The rich man in our gospel narrative lived his life in stony indifference to the needs of Lazarus, suffering at his very doorstep, his heart blocked to any sign of compassion. Pope Francis said recently, 'In all places and circumstances, Christians, with the help of their pastors, are called to hear the cry of the poor'. The poor are always there, always needy, now we have gated communities and the motorways make it possible to speed right past Lazarus' neighbourhoods. Now Lazarus can remain invisible!

In the ancient Near Eastern world, the domain of Amos, (this reading), Jesus and Paul, wealth was defined in terms of fine clothing, property and gold or silver - there was a sharp divide between the rich and poor. While the rich were seen as being blessed with the reward of wealth for their uprightness, the poor were thought to be deserving of their lot. In order to close the gap and to ease the lives of the poor, the prophets and Jesus called on the people of God to exercise charity as well as justice. It devolved upon those who had, to share with those who had not - to share with others the wealth that is God's blessing. Not to do justice towards one another was regarded as the equivalent of refusing to love and worship God.

In today's first reading (Amos 6) the rich were not hostile towards the poor, they were complacent, smug and unbothered about them. In fairness perhaps they thought that there would be time enough to attend to the poor later on, or at least someone else or some other body could do them some service. The comfort that riches could bring dulled their senses. As the Irish proverb put it (in trans) "the well-fed belly fails to observe the empty stomach". The rich man in the parable wasn't openly cruel to Lazarus - after all he allowed him shelter at his gate. The only kindness in Lazarus' life came from the dogs that licked his sores.

At death, the roles of rich and poor were dramatically and irretrievably reversed. Commitment to the Gospel as a way of life is possible only before one's death and judgement. Briefly what the parable is saying to us is this; "If you see another in need, do what you can to help. If you do not see the need, then pray God to open your eyes in good time".