

Homily, 26th Sunday in OT, September 30th, 2007, St. Mary's Visitation Parish, Elm Grove
JMJ/PJPII +

On the Rich Man and Lazarus

I must confess that I find these readings this weekend, the Gospel especially, to be very unsettling. They are the kind of readings that should make a person sit up in bed at night and lose a bit of sleep. Now, God does not give us those sorts of readings to make our lives miserable, he does it to try and get our attention- it's important to keep that fact in mind for what I'm about to say. And, it's important to keep in mind that I am preaching to myself as much as anyone else- I too am a person in need of profound conversion.

There is a great deal that could be said about the readings- a lot of different themes and threads. And I couldn't decide on one of them. So, this is not a homily- instead it's a collection of random thoughts strung together.

And, like the Gospel, there is not a lot of gloss to it. So, bear with me because, as I see it, if I'm terrified, you all get to share that burden with me.

So: Random thought number one:

The image of the rich man in the Gospel with the poor man, Lazarus, at his doorstep. Can you picture the scene? Can you imagine what was probably a large house, lit up at night, with sounds of laughter, and dancing, and revelry, and feasting filtering out into the night? Full of people who are enjoying themselves, carefree and indifferent.

Can you picture Lazarus sitting on the doorstep without any food or clothing or water as he listens to the scene behind him? And can you picture the guests coming and going to the house in their finest robes having to step over top of this nearly lifeless homeless person on the step so they can get into the front door? Lazarus is invisible to them- he is nothing to them.

Friends, I hate to say it, but there is a lot of this sort of imagery in the modern world. We are, all of us, me included, wealthier than 90 percent of the rest of the world. In this country, and in well-off pockets around the globe, we live in luxury. And, we often live with poverty on our doorsteps. How many Lazaruses of the world do we drive by on our way to downtown Milwaukee or to Marquette High School or wherever we go?

In certain respects, the United States is very much like the rich man with a whole southern hemisphere of poverty on our doorstep. They live in the slums, and the gutters, in poverty, in the chaos of countries rife with corruption. And we go on with our dinner.

True- as a nation we contribute extensively to aid and assist the so-called developing world- we are not utterly heartless- but- there is no question we can do more.

So- thought number one: to an extent, we are all the rich man to many Lazaruses of the world- there are people somewhere who are invisible to each of us for different reasons. That should give us pause.

Second random thought: this one on Hell.

Who says there is no such thing as hell? I'd say if someone is foolish enough to believe that, this Gospel story clearly suggests otherwise. For one, there is the metaphorical hell of poverty and indifference. Where the dogs lick the sores of the poor who have nothing. The Hell of ignorance, sin, of being un-loved, neglected, abandoned. Lazarus had Hell on earth.

But there is also the literal Hell of eternity, isn't there. The rich man in the Gospel story spends the afterlife in torment- agony- misery. And it is clear that there will be no escape- ever.

Why? Because in this life he was self-absorbed, care-free, and totally indifferent to anything other than his own needs. His reward was vast but also temporary. If there is no such thing as Hell, then I don't know what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel.

Related thought, number three: Is Hell really God punishing us? What exactly is Hell?

To get at this very complex question, consider for a second who the rich man in the gospel is and how he is portrayed. There he sits in torment, his mouth and body parched, and he sees Lazarus off in the distance- maybe through a haze of sorts. Lazarus- who was totally invisible to him before, Lazarus who had nothing while the rich man had everything- Lazarus is now resting in the arms of God- where all of the poor will one day rest. He is surrounded by what he didn't have on earth: love, dignity and justice.

The Rich man sees Lazarus and instantly thinks of himself- he wants Lazarus to do him a favor- to be his slave- to save him or at least save the rest of his family which he now realizes are certainly going to wind up with the same fate. Even in death, the rich man only values Lazarus to the extent that he is useful to him. What an absolutely stunning picture of selfishness.

Which suggests a couple of things about hell: one- it's pure self-absorption for eternity. The anguish of being unable to think of anyone or anything but the self. In such a state, God's love doesn't heal or sooth (like in Lazarus's case)- it burns because we can't stand it.

So, it's not so much that God sends us anywhere- we spend this brief life conditioning ourselves to either be at home in God's self-less, just, and perfect love, or, to be scorched by it because we left no room in our hearts for it.

Heaven, therefore, would've made no sense to the rich man in the gospel. Heaven is self-less communion with God and with all of creation. Someone so self-absorbed in this life

would feel awfully uncomfortable there. God simply gave him what he already proved he truly desired- the displeasure of his own lonely company. Forever.

If we spend this life preferring ourselves, then we will spend eternity preferring ourselves. If we spend this life attempting to prefer others- to prefer God- to prefer those in need- then eternity will be the reward of communion with the Holy Trinity which is self-giving in its most perfect form.

Which leads to random thought number four:

What does God have to do to convince us to love him? To convince us that he loves us? To convince us that when we close-up on ourselves that we are lost to him and he can't reach us or help us? What would it take to make us listen to him?

The rich man in today's Gospel says this to Abraham- "send Lazarus to warn my brothers of where they are heading." And Abraham's response is essentially this: "I did send warnings- for thousands of years I sent warnings. They are the law and the prophets and the scriptures- why on earth didn't they listen to them?" God is saying- you ignored me.

Or even better, Abraham adds this: "Even if someone rose from the dead you wouldn't listen to him either."

Ouch- this is of course Luke's way of describing and alluding to the rejection of the Son of God by, let's face it, most of the world.

How often I hear people say to me that they don't buy into the whole God idea. Or that the Church needs to stop nagging at them with all of our teachings. Or that God needs to prove himself somehow and then they'll listen. Or that religion is made up, etc, etc.

My question is this: is the problem with God? Or, is the problem simply that no matter what he does, no matter how much he corrects, or guides, or forgives, no matter what- we simply do not want to listen.

If you find yourself, or if you know people who find themselves, wondering why God doesn't seem to be so concerned or visible- then ask yourself- what else does he have to do to get your attention that he hasn't already done? Is the resurrection from the dead not good enough?

Which leads to the final random thought:

We are Catholics. That means that we have been given all the tools necessary to be saved and be spared the fate of the rich man in the gospel- God has tossed every possible life jacket in our direction. We have the bible, the law, the prophets, the sacraments, the Church, the Eucharist, the saints, the pope, the bishops, the catechism- a moral teaching

on every single possible life issue imaginable. We have God's own son who died and rose from the dead- we have it all!!!!

At the end of life, God is going to ask us: "What did you do with all of those gifts- all of those ways I tried to save you from yourself." Were they enough to convince you of my love for you and the importance of loving me, or were you busy waiting for someone like Lazarus to swoop down from heaven and yank you out of the fire? I suspect many people, including me, will find that a very tough question to answer.

So- there is no question, dear friends, that this is a very unsettling Gospel. It terrifies me anyway- one day I'll have to answer not only for my soul, but for all of yours since I was supposed to be looking out for you. Not because God is all into terror- but because sometimes, when the noise of this very consuming world gets so loud, sometimes he has to scream to get our attention. I think this is one of those Sundays when he screams a bit.

Make no mistake- God is love- he is mercy- he is compassion and Jesus is our brother. And that is why, in this life, he gives us millions and millions of second chances.

But it's precisely because he is loving that he is also just- that he judges, and time does eventually run out for us to decide how we want to live.

God has given us the chance to reach out to those in need. He's given us every tool necessary to transform our selfishness into selflessness.

He's given us the freedom to be attentive or indifferent.

And he's given us eternity- and we'll spend it like we spent our life here.

Either- we live for God and for his little ones who cannot help themselves, or, we live for ourselves.

Let us all choose our eternal destination wisely.