

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY – C
September 30, 2007

You probably remember that last week's Gospel talked about the connection between money and spirituality. We learned that those of us who really want to be followers of Jesus have to use as much intelligence and energy with spiritual things as we do with financial matters. We also need to be good stewards of our possessions and not make money into a god. Today's Gospel goes a step further by telling us we have a duty to share what we have with the poor.

The OT reading from the prophet Amos gets us ready for a frightening parable from Jesus. Amos, who we also heard from last Sunday, sharply criticizes the rich of his day for their ostentatious living and waste, and he warns them that: when punishment comes, don't ask why. Like a good prophet, he interpreted the signs of the times and knew the exile was coming, and the rich would be the first to go.

The wonderful but scary parable Jesus gives us in the Gospel starts off by contrasting the two main characters. One is very rich and although we aren't given his name he is traditionally called Dives, which is the Latin adjective for "rich". His vast wealth enables him to dress well, eat lavishly, and live in a fine house.

The other character is a desperately poor man named Lazarus. This is not the Lazarus Jesus later raises from the dead, but the use of the name in both cases is interesting because it means "God helps". This man is sickly, a beggar who camps out near the door of the rich man's house, hoping for a coin or a scrap of food. The rich man is oblivious, he doesn't know poor Lazarus exists. He doesn't even see him. These two men could not be more different.

When they both die, talk about poetic justice, their situations are reversed. The poor man enjoys perfect happiness in Abraham's bosom, what we might call heaven, while the rich man finds himself suffering the torments of the netherworld, what we might call hell. Well, surprise, the rich man finally notices the poor man. But it's too late.

There follows a conversation between the rich man and Abraham while Lazarus apparently just listens and smiles benignly. When we listen carefully to the rich man we can easily see how he is used to barking orders and being obeyed without question. He wants water, I assume because it was quite hot where he was, but Abraham says it's too late. The rich man wants his five brothers warned, but it's too late.

When St. Luke wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, one of his goals was to encourage those with lots of material goods to share with those who had none. When Jesus' rich followers heard this parable it probably scared the daylights out of them. It should do the same to us today.

We live in a very rich country by comparison. However meager our personal fortunes might be, in general we're far better off than most people in other countries. And yet, even among us in our own community, there are those as desperately poor as Lazarus. I see them almost every day downtown, some panhandling, some standing in line for a free lunch at the Red Door. We often choose to ignore them.

The more arrogant among us might even think: Why don't they get a job? Or, as I heard one person say: I'll bet that panhandler over there has a Lexus parked around the corner. Well, maybe so. But it's not my responsibility to determine that. My Christian duty is to look into that person's eyes and see the face of Christ looking back at me.

About ten years ago my parents and I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Our guide cautioned us not to give to any of the beggars, many of whom are children, because there it tends to be a business. Later in the trip I was surprised to observe my dad handing out shekels to every beggar

along the way. I asked him why he was disregarding the guide's advice, and he simply said to me, "I don't know whether they need the money or not. But once I give it to them, what they do with it is *their* moral obligation. I don't have the right to judge their honesty." Well, I learned a lot about personal virtue that day.

Today's second reading from Paul's first letter to Timothy encourages us to pursue a life of virtue. When you stop and think about it, we don't often hear that word today: virtue. It sounds kind of quaint and old fashioned. But it's still something we need to do, strive to become virtuous. As Christians, we pursue virtue not so that we can get something out of it, but because it is what we are called to do. Being virtuous is actually one of the definitions of the word Christian.

As I said last week, there's nothing wrong with being rich. I wouldn't mind giving it a try myself. But perhaps St. Paul really had the right idea a few verses after this passage ends. He says, "Tell (the rich) to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, to be ready to share."

I think it's good advice for all of us, no matter how much we have.