

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Commentaries

First Reading: Amos 6:1, 4-7

A central theme running through Amos is that there must be justice in the land, and the poor must be free from oppression, if Israel is to be loyal to the covenant. Cult is false and luxury is oppression if the poor are not cared for. Here Amos is warning the Israelites that their rich lifestyle and their neglect of the poor will result in their experiencing political defeat. Amos describes the rich lifestyle adopted by the wealthy: lying on beds of ivory, eating the best of food, listening to music, drinking wine, anointing themselves with fine oil, all the time ignoring 'the collapse of Joseph,' that is, the collapse of the nation.

Second Reading: 1 Tim 6:11-16

This is a concluding farewell of the letter, which presents a confession of faith that is formed using formal early Christian hymns/prayers. Timothy is encouraged to be faithful to his baptism and to his ministry, to keep the commandments 'until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ.' What is most interesting about this is the way that language that echoes phrases used within the earlier covenant with reference to Yahweh is here applied directly to Jesus as the returning Christ.

Gospel: Luke 16:19-31

This story is found only in Luke's gospel and it has a single focus: if one does not hear the basic laws of justice and mercy (contained in the law and prophets) then even the resurrection of the Christ will not bring conversion. Before anyone can be a witness to the resurrection and share in its life, they must already be followers of the ways of justice and care of the poor. This point is further emphasized in that the concern of the rich man for his brothers is a form of compassion, but this need to care for the poor is so basic that the story assumes that anyone so insensitive to the need of the poor whom they see would be wholly insensitive.

Luke 16:19-31 in its biblical context

The previous gospel ended with Jesus telling the disciples that they cannot serve God and money (Lk 16:13b). Between this passage and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke describes that while Jesus was teaching the disciples to be prudent stewards of property and not to allow love of riches to interfere with discipleship, the Pharisees were also listening (Lk 16:14). They sneered at him and Jesus corrects them by saying, 'You justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God' (Lk 16:15). The Pharisees saw wealth as a sign of God's blessing for a righteous life. While this is part of the Bible's teaching, the Law equally requires care of the poor and needy. This disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees over the interpretation of Scripture leads to this parable about Lazarus and the rich man. Luke gives a name to the poor man, 'Lazarus' which means 'God has helped'. This familiar and personal treatment indicates Luke's interest in, and care for, the poor. By contrast, the rich man is unnamed. In the Latin Bible, the word for 'rich' or 'wealthy' is '*dives*' which was eventually used as the man's proper name.

When we place the parable of the rich man and Lazarus within its proper context, we see that it is not simply about the proper use of riches; it is also about whether or not the Pharisees accept the teaching authority of those whom God has sent them: Moses, the prophets, and Jesus himself. From the point of view of Luke and his reading audience, this parable is about whether or not people will believe even if someone rises from the dead.

Abraham does not tell the rich man he is being punished for not taking care of the poor. He simply explains that the positions of the two have now been reversed. Lazarus is now comforted while the rich is tormented. There is a great chasm between the two, and Lazarus cannot come to comfort the rich man. At this point, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house to warn his brothers. '*Dives*' tacitly admits that, in his lifetime, he had misunderstood the Scriptures; now he wants to warn his brothers. Abraham replies, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.' Abraham counters that the Scriptures contain what they need. The rich man, having not listened to Moses and the prophets himself, does not think that this is enough so he says, 'Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' Then Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.' The issue is not further revelation, but proper understanding. Failure to understand Scripture in such fundamental matters as care of the poor will lead to misunderstanding about the Messiah and his resurrection.

The Pharisees obviously are compared to the rich man. By telling them the story of the rich man and Lazarus Jesus is warning the Pharisees about two things: both their abuse of wealth and their rejection of him. The Pharisees have sneered at Jesus as he taught the proper use of wealth. In acting this way they are obviously acting like the rich man in that they are refusing to listen to the teachers whom God has sent them, to 'Moses and the prophets,' and, although they do not realise this, to Jesus himself.

This latter part of the parable, the part that takes place after the rich man and Lazarus die, is designed especially for the Pharisees who believed in the resurrection of the body. For Luke and his audience, the parable ends on a very ironic note. Even when someone did rise from the dead, many still did not believe.

Reflection

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we are presented with two contrasting figures: an attractive rich man who wears 'purple garments and fine linen' and dines 'sumptuously' and a very unattractive poor starving man, covered with sores that dogs lick. Yet, none of us who hears this parable identifies readily with the rich man. Why is it we identify with Lazarus and not with the rich man? This defies common sense! It does make sense to us, however, for we know that this parable is really about eternal life. We know that we get what we deserve.

The problem with the rich man is not his wealth but rather his indifference to Lazarus who sat outside his gates. The chasm which separated the rich man and Lazarus after death is already present while they are living. This chasm – much more than the breach between rich and poor – is a gulf of uncaring. In this life the rich man could have chosen to act differently and the chasm could be bridged. Once we enter the next life, the chasm is unbridgeable.

The gospel uses the metaphor 'great chasm' and paints a clear picture of what happens on each side: rich/poor, dined sumptuously/eat scraps, netherworld/bosom of Abraham, received good/received bad, torment/comforted, place of torment/rise from the dead. Although the 'great chasm' metaphor in the gospel leads us to compare the two possibilities of the afterlife, the metaphor also applies to this life and how we are living today, for how we are living now is how we will be living for all eternity. The metaphor spells out for us the reason why we identify with Lazarus. Although the wealth and comfort of this life are attractive, in the face of eternity they are too fleeting to choose. What really counts is living faithfully now so we are on the right side of the chasm in eternity! The present moment is amplified in eternity. Ultimately, how we live both now and in eternity is our choice. God makes good (or bad) on our choice!

The problem is not that we do not know how to live our lives. The problem is, we tend to talk about the poor and those in need of our care globally and in abstract terms. In this gospel, the poor and the needy one is presented as an individual with a name lying at a doorstep. Besides Moses and the prophets, we also have Jesus to teach us; we, too, only need to listen. Jesus teaches us how to see those in need around us and reach out in concern.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is blunt: how the rich man spends the afterlife was determined in this life by lack of concern for the poor man 'lying at his door'. Now is the time to bridge whatever chasms exist between ourselves and those in need. After death the divide is impassable, and our eternity is set. So, *now* is our time: Who is lying at our door?

Questions for faith-sharing groups

1. Whose teaching authority do you accept? Why?
2. What are some of the 'chasms' which exist between people today?
3. Who are the poor lying at your doorstep? What is your response to them?
4. What about your lifestyle do you consider legitimate 'taking care of yourself'? Does anything about your lifestyle reflect 'excess wealth'? If so, what do you think you should do about that?
5. To avoid the mistake of the rich man, what do you need to do?