

**This Sunday's Readings – the 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time** – Today's readings are a continuation of last week's reading regarding social justice, wealth, and the responsibility of the wealthy to their fellow human beings.

The first reading is again from Amos. In this passage he rails against those who live a life of luxury and who are complacent and self centered. They did not use their wealth responsibly by sharing it with others who were not as fortunate as they were. Amos warns them that their life would be their ruin and "they shall be the first to go into exile". That punishment was not long in coming. The Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC and carried many of the wealthy into exile. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column adds this comment on today's first reading – "Amos leaves no doubt where he and Yahweh stand on the issue. Condemning the wealthy in both Jerusalem and Samaria, the prophet perfectly describes their "me first" mindset. "Lying on beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on their couches, they eat lambs taken from the flock, and calves from the stall! Improvising to the music of the harp, like David, they devise their own accompaniment. They drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the best oils." In themselves, none of these actions is wrong; but they have a divisive component. Amos zeroes in on this evil in his last line. "Yet they are not made ill by the collapse of Joseph!" They don't give a darn about the poverty and devastation destroying almost everyone in Israel (Joseph). Wealth blinds them to the plight of the less fortunate".

The Gospel reading from Luke is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. This is a very familiar reading for most of us. We do not know the name of the rich man. However, in the oldest known Greek manuscript of Luke's Gospel (ca. 175-225 AD), his name is recorded as an abbreviated form of "Nineveh". Unfortunately there is little to no support for this in other manuscripts. In the Latin Vulgate translation of St. Jerome, he is referred to as "Dives", the Latin word for "rich man". The rich man lives a life of luxury while Lazarus lives a life of suffering. When both die, the rich man goes to the netherworld where he lives in eternal torment. The Greek word *Αδης*, which here is translated as "netherworld", is really translated as Hades, the word for the Greco-Roman underworld. Remember that Luke was Greek and wrote to a Greek audience, primarily in Greece and the Greek colonies on the West coast of modern day Turkey. The St. Charles Borromeo Bible Study of Picayune, MS, adds this definition of "netherworld" – "The abode of the dead, *sheol* (Hebrew)/*hades* (Greek)/*purgatorio* (Latin). Actually, both the Bosom of Abraham and the place where the rich man is are in sheol/hades/purgatory. As Josephus (a first century Pharisee and historian) explains in his *Discourse Concerning Hades*, the just are guided by angels to the right hand, where there is a region of light where they wait for that rest and eternal new life in heaven; while the unjust are dragged by force to the left hand where they have a near view of hell itself, but they can also see the just. Between these two places, there is a chasm to prevent the just from having compassion on the unjust and to keep the unjust from crossing over." Lazarus goes to heaven and resides in "the bosom of Abraham". The rich man asks for comfort from the unquenchable flames, but he receives none. What did the rich man do to deserve such a fate? He obeyed the laws of Moses and the prophets to the letter but he missed the true spirit of the law, which is social justice for all. The rich man totally missed the point that

he had the responsibility to share his gifts with others who were not as fortunate as himself, in this case Lazarus. It was his love of wealth and the life of luxury that proved to be his demise. He pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers so that they may see him and reform their lives. Abraham refuses by saying “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead”. This was a direct reference to Jesus’ own resurrection. The message of this parable is as pertinent today as it was 2000 years ago. We, as disciples, have the responsibility to share our gifts with those less fortunate than ourselves.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* adds these comments on today’s Gospel reading – “Jesus lived in a cultural world where people believed that all the goods of life (land, wealth, honor, blood, semen, etc.) were limited in quantity and already distributed. They lived by the norm “there’s no more where this came from” (Contrast the American conviction “there’s always more where this came from.”) To get ahead or improve one’s lot in life was completely unthinkable. A person who gained something was always suspected of taking it—even if unintentionally—from someone else. This is shameful. (Both the woman who found her lost coin and the man who found his lost sheep were obliged to prove to the community that this was indeed what was lost and not something that was stolen to replace the loss.) This background defines “rich” and “poor” in Mediterranean culture. To be rich means, among other things, that one doesn’t work for a living. Zacchaeus, the “chief” of toll collectors in his region, hired collectors and levied a percentage on the toll for his support. He did not personally collect tolls. To be poor is to have lost one’s basic status, whether landowner or beggar, *temporarily*. The Bible frequently mentions poor widows and orphans in one breath—neither status is viewed as permanent.

#### THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

This parable contrasts a rich and poor man. The rich man is clearly affluent and blessed with surplus. His cultural obligation, common to anyone with surplus, is to give alms. Any windfall of wealth must be immediately distributed (see Luke 12:16-21). To retain surplus for oneself is to be greedy (12:15). In fact, it is perfectly appropriate to substitute “greedy” for the word “rich” in the New Testament. Lazarus is described as a “poor man” who lay prostrate at the rich man’s gate. He is probably crippled and definitely covered with sores, an impurity doubly compounded by the wild dogs who lick them. Curiously, Lazarus is not begging. How can the rich man give alms if Lazarus is not begging? Hearers of this parable would think the worst of Lazarus: his illness suggests divine punishment. He’s clearly lost his status, and by not begging he makes no effort to regain his status.

#### THE GATE

The gate by which Lazarus posts himself performs two functions. It keeps Lazarus outside and the rich man inside; but it can also be the rich man’s entry into the world where he can give alms or become a patron to needy clients. This creates a gap between the two, which only grows larger as the story progresses.

#### REVERSAL OF POSITION

The theme of reversal is common in ancient stories. The surprise in this story is that only after both characters die do we learn of the reversal. Here is the first indication that the rich man was derelict. Even in death, the rich man “still does not get it.” He tries to trade on ancestral spiritual family privilege by addressing Abraham as “Father.” Surely status should help, but it doesn't, Even more tactlessly, he still views Lazarus as his inferior. “Send Lazarus to refresh me!” Abraham's response concludes the parable and makes the point. The poor one who suffered “bad things” is now consoled; the rich one who was consoled with “good things” in life is now tormented. This is not a moral teaching; it is only an illustration of the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Plain ([Luke 6:20, 24](#)).

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