

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Twentieth-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Lk 16:19-31

Ave Maria Catholic Church, September 25, 2022 – Fr. David M Vidal

There was a rich man. We do not know his name. Our only knowledge of him is that he was rich and that he was known because of his many possessions, his fine garments, and his splendid feasts. We also know that he was indifferent to the needs of others and that he was very attached to the possessions he would one day have to leave.

There was another man. We know his name: Lazarus. His name is the Latin form of Eleazar which means *God is my help*. We also know that he didn't have anything, better yet, he had nothing in this world that tied him to this world. Then, when he died, he was carried by the angels to the bosom of Abraham.

Why does Jesus offer this contrasting image between these two men? We immediately perceive that there is a great value in the poverty of Lazarus, and there is great misery in the misuse of the possessions of the rich man.

To understand the value of poverty or the need for detachment of earthly goods, Jesus not only uses parables but also offers his very life as an example.

It is the unmistakable sign of Jesus: being rich, He became poor. In the words of Saint Paul: *“For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich so that by his poverty you might become rich,”* (2 Cor 8:9).

Being the Lord of heaven and earth, He became our brother. In poverty, he was born in a manger in Bethlehem. He lived the simple life of *“the son of a carpenter,”* (Mt 13:55). During his public ministry, we also know that *“he had no place even to lay his head,”* (Lk 9:58). Finally, he took the cross upon himself for us and died naked on the Cross as the ultimate sign of detachment.

Jesus was born poor and died poor because we are poor. He became one of us. He took our own condition. He was sent to the poor to preach the good news of salvation.

That is the explanation Jesus gives to the disciples of John the Baptist: *“Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor,”* (Lk 4:18).

He was sent to the poor to bring the good news. Jesus was sent to us to bring us the richness of God's holiness and perfect happiness.

Let's go back to the parable: Why does Jesus offer this contrasting image between the poor man and the rich man? We can say that this contrasting image is a picture of each one of us.

In many ways, we are poor. Jesus made himself poor (when He took our nature), but we are poor. Even the highest prince and king, and the most powerful people in the history of the world, each one of them carries poverty and deficiency. Who is the human being who does not suffer poverty in one way or another? Poverty is not only a lack of material means but also a lack of spiritual means such as knowledge, love, and virtue. Poverty is also our limit of time, health, and the suffering of trials. Then, if we are poor, we need assistance and help. We are in need!

In many ways, we are poor, but in many other ways, we are rich. Nobody can say, I do not have any talent, I do not have any gift, I am completely bankrupt. Even if we do not possess material goods, we are endowed with gifts and talents, which are our riches.

Then, if we are rich, we must help others because our talents and gifts are loans that we acquired which require a great deal of investment in order to pay them back.

This is what Saint Gregory the Great understood as he wrote in his *“Regula Pastoralis”* that when we do works of mercy, *“more than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice.”*

What does it mean “works of mercy”? Works of mercy mean: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead, and it also means instructing, advising, consoling, comforting, forgiving, and bearing wrongs patiently.

Finally: What is the real value of a merciful work?

Sometimes, we focus our attention on *what we give*, and we forget to see *how we give it*. In other words, we must not fall into the temptation of looking just at what we give, but we must go more deeply into the interior of our hearts. This is the question: *what is in our hearts when we give with our hands?*

The interior value of the gift is very important. We can remember the words of Saint Paul: *“If I give away all I have. . . but have not love, I gain nothing.”* (1 Cor 13:3). What a contrasting image: *giving away everything and gaining nothing!* Why? Because everything was just in your hands, but in your heart, there was nothing.

Saint Augustine also shared his thoughts when he wrote: *“If you stretch out your hand to give, but have not mercy in your heart, you have not done anything; but if you have mercy*

in your heart, even when you have nothing to give with your hand, God accepts your alms,” (Enarrat. in Ps. CXXV, 5).

What does it mean to give with love? It means to recognize that when we give, we are imitating God in his generosity: *“Who makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust,”* (Mt 5:45). It also means to acknowledge that Jesus is present in every person in need as he reminds us: *“Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me,”* (Mt 25:40).

In many ways we are poor, and we need assistance and help. In many ways, we are rich, and we must be generous and assist others. And do not think that the other is far away. Sometimes we believe that to help the poor, we must travel for miles or even go to a different continent! But in truth, we just need to turn our heads to the right and the left to discover that the person in need is right here, next to us.

Let’s examine ourselves; how many Lazarus’ come to us asking for help, and we turn them away? Let’s extend our hands yes, but also our hearts to help them, and when we welcome them, let’s remember that when we receive them, we are in His own words, welcoming Jesus Himself. Amen