

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Amos 6:1.4-7 / Luke 16:19-31)
29.10.2019

The story recounted by Jesus in today's gospel reading draws our attention to the consequences of selfishness in a person's life. Selfishness is an ill which can overtake all of us and it can do so in very subtle ways – so subtly that we don't realise that we have fallen prey to it. Today's gospel story implies that selfishness is a blinding ill. So much so, that the rich man in the gospel story didn't even see the poor man at his gate. When all was going well for the wealthy house owner, he was so wrapped up in himself that he saw no one other than himself alone. Very significantly, in the story which Jesus recounts, this is where the rich man ends up: all alone, cut off from others!

The point made in the text we read is that the rich man's earthly life was an insulated existence. Now that might sound comfortable. Insulation keeps people warm, after all. It soon becomes clear, however, that it wasn't really good for the man to have lived in this way: his insulation led to his isolation... and isolation is not good.

To be isolated is to find oneself in a sad state of being. To be cut off from others, closed in upon oneself, is hardly satisfying, even though a person living this way might be foolish enough, at least to begin with, to hold on to the illusion that he or she is finding satisfaction – and even fulfilment in his or her self-absorption.

Might I go as far as to suggest that the rich man in the story was not only totally oblivious to the poor man who lay at his doorstep, but that he was also unaware of himself?

The words of a psalm come to mind and seem applicable to him: *In his riches man lacks wisdom*. In his affluence the rich man in today's gospel story was *not wise to himself*. In his riches the rich man lacked self-awareness.

The impression that comes across in the story is that what the rich man possessed became his identity. It is surely significant that in the story he is never given a name. He is simply referred to as *a rich man*. It is as if his identity was defined by what he had accumulated – his vast wealth – rather than by who he was. How very impersonal!

Lazarus, on the other hand, had a name. He was someone who had a personal identity; he had a dignity which was recognised. Ultimately, he was honoured by God. If the rich man in the story never paid heed to the poor man at his gate, the Lord certainly did. Interestingly, the poor man's name – *Lazarus* (same root as Eleazar) – means *the one whom God has helped*. The rich man may have done nothing to help Lazarus, but the Lord cared for him and we are shown how He intervened in his favour.

It was not only Lazarus whom the rich man ignored. He actually ignored himself. As long as his sole focus was on his accumulated wealth, the rich man failed to pay heed to his own deepest needs. His surface needs may have been catered for, but his most profound longings were left untended to. In popular speech we might say that the rich man was someone who *couldn't see beyond the length of his own nose*. Not only was he blind to others, he was also blind to his own shortcomings; he failed to see himself for who and what he had become: a totally selfish, but actually self-less being, because of his lack of charity. A well-known gospel text comes to my mind at this point. I think of that verse which reads: *What would it profit a man if he were to gain the whole world and lose his very self?* The rich man of today's gospel parable is the perfect illustration, the epitome of this saying. The story shows him to have lost his very self.

At the end of the story the rich man is depicted to be languishing in hell: a place where true life eludes him. The rich man's apparently comfortable earthly existence, cut off from others, turned out to be an apprenticeship for a state of perpetual suffering in painful isolation. What terrible anguish held him in its grasp as he contemplated the great gulf that existed between himself and God and himself and others!

The point of the story we read this morning is not to have us gloat over the eternal punishment of the rich man, but to awaken within us a sense of sadness in his regard. Moreover, more than just to make have us feel compassion for the rich man in his pitiful state, the purpose of the parable is to awaken within us a greater vigilance over our own ways. The story seeks to make us more self-aware. In recounting this story Jesus' intention was to alert us, His listeners, to the consequences of selfishness in our lives; it was to help us see and consider the drastic consequences incurred when we live our lives in a totally self-absorbed and self-centred way.

Today's gospel story can appear somewhat harsh to many of us. Why was the rich man punished to the extent that he was? There are those who might say: *Sure, he did no one any harm*. It is true that in the story there is nothing which suggests that the rich man actively exploited others or that he set out to defraud people to acquire his wealth. He seems to have just been wealthy, without having cheated others in a bid to maintain his exuberant lifestyle. In the story we are simply told that he dressed well and that he ate well. Is to dress well and to eat well so terrible? Surely, the rich man had every right to maintain his appearance and to nourish himself – just as we all have these same rights. An economic analyst could even argue that the rich man's attention to his appearance and his food was a good thing: in that, spending to attain these things, he contributed to the economic life of his community and thus helped those with whom he engaged in commerce to enrich themselves. The rich man certainly seems to have helped maintain at least one tailor in business and likewise a good grocery store and probably a butcher too, with oil and wine merchants as well. But if he contributed to the livelihood of others, he did so without any conscious concern for these people. His primary concern, if not his sole concern, seems to have been just himself.

Given that today's story is one of the most severe judgement scenes in all the gospels, we might ask: why did Jesus depict the rich man as being treated so harshly?

It seems that Jesus was as hard as He was on the rich man not because of this successful man's affluence, but because he did not care for anyone other than *Mister Number One*, himself alone. Jesus' grievance with the rich man was that he lacked care, compassion and even just consideration when it came to those less fortunate than himself. The rich man was so self-absorbed, so self-centred and downright selfish, that he didn't even see, let alone acknowledge and reach out to, others. He failed to see the signs of the Lord's blessing in his own existence and the signs of God's life and in the lives of other people – including those very near to him.

The rich man clearly lacked appreciation of the blessings he himself had received in life; certainly he didn't recognise the responsibilities that came with his being blessed in the way he was. He also failed to grasp that he was called to honour God's life made manifest in the lives of other people.

There is a lesson here for us. When we are blessed we must understand that it is so that we might bless. When God is good to us it is so that we, in our turn, may reflect His goodness to others.

If the first person to be acknowledged and considered in our lives is the Lord – the source of all blessing, then the next person to be seen as having been blessed by the Lord’s grace is our self. Stemming from this, and one with it, we must come to see that all other people should also be acknowledged, considered and respected. We must remember that every human being is made in the image and likeness of our Creator God and therefore is worthy of the honour that we owe to the Lord Himself. To ignore another person is to ignore their Creator God. Ignoring the poor man, Lazarus, the nameless rich man of Jesus’ story, ignored the Lord his God and failed to show Him proper honour and respect.

May we learn from this parable that we are called to open our eyes to those around us. May we see the Lord our God in every person we encounter and honour our Creator in them. Finally, may we reflect something of the compassionate concern of the One in whose image and likeness we were made to those who call out for our help – including those whose cry, while it remains silent, is visible to us. There are those who will never cry out for our help, but whose longing for our attention we should see.

The poor and needy around us may not be mendicants begging for food. The poor and needy one, may be our spouse, our child, our parent, our fellow community member, our next door neighbour, our friend – and indeed our enemy: any and every person who just longs for a little attention from us.

Amen!