

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Amos 6:1. 4-7 / Luke 16:19-31)
25.09.2022

Dear brothers and sisters,

One of the things I learnt when I came to live in Northern Ireland is that we have to greet people by their name. If you don't, you get a bad mark in their books! I must confess that I have probably received a lot of bad marks because when I go to open the door of the monastery, which is a glass door, I see the persons ringing the bell and it happens that I can't remember immediately their name. So you imagine the dialogue: "Hello, brother Eric!" I answer "Hello, good to see you". The visitor continues: "How is everybody, brother Eric?"... And I cannot yet remember their name... Things become worse... Yes, it is true: Names matter!

Have you noticed that in today's parable the poor man has a name: he is called 'Lazarus', whereas the rich man has no name: he is referred to as 'the rich man'. Is this not the way for Jesus to tell us something, to tell us that he is on the side of the poor man? Is this not a way for Jesus to teach us his preferential love for the poor?

When we call people by their names, we show them respect. We mean that they are not only anonymous people but persons: we acknowledge their identity, their uniqueness, their dignity. They are children of God, created in the image and likeness of God, icons of God for us and for the world.

Jesus does not give a name to the rich man of the parable. In this, Jesus is not saying to us that he has no time for the rich man, but that the rich man is not a man according to God's heart. That is the sad reality. It is to this that Jesus wants to draw our attention. If we want an example of self-indulgence, we have just to look at this man. He wears an outer garment coloured with an expensive dye probably extracted from the murex shellfish, and an undergarment made of fine linen. He dines sumptuously and with company not only once a week but everyday. He is so busy feasting that he has no time to notice the poor man lying at his gate and do something for him.

The poor man whose name is Lazarus is portrayed as a helpless, lonely beggar, who receives nothing but the unwanted attention of stray dogs. His name, Lazarus, means 'He whom God helps'. This name is paradoxical since no one appears on the scene to care for him. Lazarus is realistic: He does not dream of eating at the rich man's table. He would be happy just to eat the pieces of bread on which the guests wipe their fingers before throwing them on the floor... And so, he waits, and waits, and waits... Does he wait in vain?

If life ended with our death, perhaps the rich man would have chosen the right way and the poor man would find himself on the wrong path. But a surprise awaits both of them in the second half of the parable. Life does not end with death. Death is not the end, but a passage, a birth to new life. There is life before death, and there is life after death, eternal life with God and all the redeemed, with a kind of reversal of fortunes between life before death and life after death. This was a theme already present at the time. In contemporary pagan Egyptian literature in which we

read: “He who has been good on earth will be blessed in the kingdom of the dead, and he who has been evil on earth will suffer in the kingdom of the dead”. We read also in Jewish literature of the epoch that what happens to people in the next world depends on what they do on earth. Is this not the teaching of Jesus in the beatitudes? Therein He states: “Happy you who are hungry now, you shall be satisfied... Alas for you who are rich, you are having your consolation now...” (Luke 6,20-26).

Let us come back to the second part of our parable: on his death, Lazarus received an angelic escort to the heavenly banquet where he reclined his head on the bosom of Abraham, his father in faith. Lazarus is no longer the outsider and the forgotten one, but the favoured guest. Lazarus was right to humbly wait and hope. His hope was not disappointed.

On his death, the rich man discovers that there is an after life. For him it is a place of torment. This place is for those who did nothing to alleviate the affliction that was before their eyes during their life on earth. This place of torment is not only for those who assaulted or abused others during their lives here on earth, but also for those who showed apathy or insensitivity to others, those who did nothing to help others, those who treated others as if they were already dead and forgotten.

Dorothy Solle wrote: “In the face of suffering, you are either with the victim or the executioner. There is no other place. God is always on the side of the victim”. Each one of us is invited to ask himself or herself: In the presence of a victim, where am I? Where have I chosen to be? Am I on the side of the victim or on the side of the executioner? This is an uncomfortable question, but it is a question of life or death.

The message of the parable is clear: It is urgent to change, to repent, to be converted as long as we are still here on earth. We don't need miracles to do that. The way for it is to listen to Moses and the Prophets. The way for it is to practice *Lectio Divina*, that is to say to give ourselves to a prayerful reading of the Scriptures, and to put into practice what the living God inspires us to do. And among the many things that the Lord tells us, there is an invitation not to pass by the poor person without looking at them and coming to their help. If we follow this way, the Lord will call us by our name and will introduce us into his kingdom of peace, life and eternal happiness.