26 C 2025

There is a sharp social justice focus in the Scriptures today. Some of us as believers have difficulty in hearing the Gospel of social justice. The prophet Amos vividly depicts the luxurious and idle lifestyle of the wealthy while the Gospel presents the utter destitution of a human being. We are not told that the rich man is wicked or vicious in any particular way. The focus falls on the fact that, absorbed in his comfortable life, he is numb to the presence of the poor and inattentive to their needs, and simply does not notice Lazarus lying in such need at his door. By the same contrast, we are not told that Lazarus is notably virtuous or deserving. It is simply his desperate situation that will attract the attention of God.

Every day, one feasts one starves. Luxurious garments for one, wounds and wet tongues of hungry dogs for another. Lying at the door, a door that never opened. The contrast that begun in life is continued in death. The drama swings on the notion of a great reversal that is to take place. Within the story itself the reversal takes place when the rich man and the poor Lazarus die. No need to dwell on the “destinations” of each. The point here is that, *across the change from this life to the next*, the fixed nature of the situation remains.

In the situation on earth, the rich man’s indifference ensured that no crumb of sustenance or comfort from his table to the beggar at the door. Lazarus longed for food, even a crumb, but there was no *“crossing over”* from one side to another. Now in the afterlife situation, there is exactly the same stand-off--only now it is the rich man who has the longing, and the poor man who is in comfort. The rich man longs for a drop or water to quench his terrible thirst, but as Abraham sadly explains, Lazarus can be of no help to him now. As before, there is no *“crossing over.”* The fix that the rich man’s complacency established in the previous situation has encased an eternal fix that cannot be dissolved. He had not been hospitable to Lazarus. Now Lazarus cannot be hospitable to him.

Wealth and luxury in itself are not the problem in the story. St Luke makes the point in his Gospel that living such a life blinded the man to the need of a fellow human being, pointing to wider social responsibility. The opportunity to attend to such obligations will not last forever. When God acts on behalf of the poor, all is reversed. The rich will find themselves trapped in a painful and unchangeable fix of their own making.

Today’s Gospel story is about conversion. It’s about the difficulty that riches and luxury stand in the way of conversion. Hopeless, the rich man asks a reprieve. Abrahan suggests that what his brothers need to hear is contained already in the Scriptures which contain ample warnings about the need to care for the widow, the orphan, the needy stranger at the door. The rich man knows that this will not be enough to change his brothers. Knowingly, Abraham replies, *“If they do not listen to Scriptures, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”* In the story the one who would come back from the dead would, of course, be Lazarus.

Social justice should grow in relevance in a world where so much of the population sits like Lazarus outside the door. St Paul’s Letter to Timothy reminds us of our responsibilities in view of living our past example, and the future coming of Christ.

