

Homily for Trinity XV - 2022 – Dives and Lazarus

Our Lord draws a deliberate and vivid contrast today between a rich man and a poor man. The rich man is often referred to by the name of Dives, but *dives* is simply the Latin word for "rich." He was dressed in purple and fine linen, which was the ultimate of extravagance in clothing in those days, and he also set a very fine gourmet table, not once a week but daily. He lived a hollow life concerned only with the love of display and the desire for self-indulgence.

In direct contrast to this, is the Lord's portrayal of Lazarus, the only character in any of the parables who is given a name. The name is significant; it means, "*God is my helper.*" This is deliberately intended by our Lord to suggest that Lazarus was a godly man. Even though poor and a beggar, God was his helper. Though he was a godly man, he nevertheless lay at the gate of this rich man, sick and hungry, his body covered with loathsome, running sores, waiting for the crusts of bread that would be thrown out after the rich man's feasting. The only help that came to this man was from the dogs who would lick his sores. He was ignored totally by the rich man who drove daily out the gate but who never saw him lying there.

At this point, our Lord changes the scene completely. They both die and the rich man was buried.

There are two frequent reactions to this story. The first one is that many feel it is rather fitting that he is in torment, while in the next life Lazarus is comforted and finds relief.

"That's the way it should be," many will think, feeling that this is what heaven and hell are for, to compensate for what happens in this present life, to square accounts for what we have to go through in life. If that is the way we feel about it, then, of course, we are quite wrong. We must understand that the rich man was not in hell because he was rich any more than that Lazarus was in heaven because he was poor. Heaven and hell are not a

compensation for what one goes through here. The principle that determines who goes where is quite different, as the parable makes abundantly clear.

A second reaction, is to recoil from its picture of the afterlife; especially from the thought of hell, with its flames and its torments. Many are offended by this story and feel that it could not really be what Jesus would teach.

Once again that view is wrong. There is absolutely no question but that these words came from the lips of the Lord Jesus himself. In thinking about a story like this, we must remember two things very clearly. Firstly, our Lord is using metaphors and symbols as he paints his picture of how things are in the afterlife. Hell is not a question of location but of another dimension entirely. If we think in terms of dimension rather than location we shall be much more in line with what the Scriptures are getting at.

The second thing we must face is that these symbols mean something. For example, the flames, though they do not mean literal flames, do refer to something that is like literal flames. In our inner life we can have a sense of being consumed by some burning passion within. The only thing we can compare it to is being burned with physical flames. Though it is not the same thing, it is often more real.

Thus the torment here is not physical torment but mental and spiritual. Perhaps that of loneliness (what a torment that can be!), or of despair.

The water is a symbol of relief. Desiring to have Lazarus touch the tip of his tongue with a finger dipped in water is a symbol of some kind of relief for which the rich man hopes.

The chasm indicates the impossibility of change. It is not a literal chasm, it is a symbol which indicates the impossibility of a change in either condition. No one can pass from the one to the other.

The final scene of this story records the further conversation of Abraham and this formerly rich man. For the first time, the rich man feels something akin to love: concern for his brothers. Yet it only adds to his torment for he can do nothing about it. The torment of the dead is that they cannot warn the living, just as it can be that the torment of mature loving parents that their erring young will simply not listen to them." Anyone who has felt that torment will know something of what the torment of the dead is - a desire to warn but an inability to do so.

But why does God not grant this man his request to warn his brothers? If God really does not desire that men to go to hell, why does He not allow the utmost of warnings in order that any might be kept from hell? The rich man is not denied his request because God is unwilling to give as much opportunity as possible. He is denied it because it is useless, it will not work. As Abraham points out, if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if some one should rise from the dead.

How accurately this parable portrays our human desire for the spectacular, the dramatic, the shocking to occur! We have all felt this way at times. We ask, "Why is it so hard to believe? Why doesn't God do more? Why doesn't He perform miracles again, as in the days of our Lord?" We need to ask ourselves: How many who saw the miracles in our Lord's day still believed in Him at the end of His life? How many stayed with Him who believed because of the miracles?

We know there were very few. Only a handful of people stood around the cross. Even when Jesus himself returned from the dead (and that story has been proclaimed around the world ever since) most do not believe.

Abraham is right. The rich man was in hell because he refused to heed Moses and the prophets, not because he was rich. His self-centred, self-indulgent life is a reflection of that refusal, but he is not in hell because he was rich.

Lazarus, however, is in heaven because he believed Moses and the prophets. He made God his helper and trusted in Him. He is not in heaven merely as compensation for what he went through on earth. There will be many a poor man in hell, as there will be rich men in heaven.

The point of the parable is this: The main thing in this life is to give heed to what God has already said and done, to heed Moses and the prophets. Especially we should heed the last and greatest of the prophets, the One who tells us this story - the Lord Jesus Christ!

Dear People, to fear God and to walk in fellowship with him, in obedience to His commandments, and especially those commandments that bring us into knowledge of and relationship with the Son of God, that his life may be in us to change our whole lives - this is living. This is what God intends. This, and only this, is what makes us whole.