

Homily for The Twenty Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)(28/09/2019)

Reading through this Gospel story, which most of us know quite well, we pick up a message which is pretty obvious. Compared to 90% of the world's population, everyone in this church is rich. We should be more generous with them. More generous with sharing our money with them, of course, but also more active in creating a society where generosity and fairness are the norm; a culture where people just instinctively treat each other with kindness and with generous hearts. Wouldn't we all like to live in a world like that? If that's the message that you get from this Gospel story, and if you leave this Church today determined to act on it, to change and to help the culture to change, then that's a result; it would be pretty good. I'd be happy with that, so maybe I should just sit down now and stop talking....

Maybe. But getting a good message from the Gospel isn't enough if it stops us looking deeper and seeing something more surprising and more challenging. So here is the deal. You hold onto that first idea and take it away to act on it, and I will be brief in trying to take you a little deeper into the message of this Gospel.

Commenting on this passage Pope Francis said: *'Lazarus teaches us that other persons are a gift. A right relationship with people consists in gratefully recognizing their value. Even the poor person at the door of the rich is not a nuisance, but a summons to conversion and change'* [Message for Lent 2017]. So its not just a story about being generous to the poor. The rich man isn't being asked to send a plate of sandwiches out for Lazarus, he is being asked to see and acknowledge in Lazarus the humanity that they both share. It looks as if their lives move on parallel lines, that they will never really meet. Yet it isn't so. If nothing else, we know that they will converge at the grave, because like it or not that is where they will both end up, and so will we. If you look at the story carefully you will notice that the rich man knows who Lazarus is: he recognizes the man who used to live on the street outside his gate, and he even knows the man's name *'..send Lazarus..'* he says to Abraham. The rich man knows Lazarus, but he does not engage with him at all, there is no contact with him, until the moment that the rich man needs him. The very moment that the rich man needs something from Lazarus, which he never did in this life, then he notices him and acknowledges him by name. Its all changed now. In this life the rich man was self-sufficient; he had fine clothes, the clothes of an emperor or a God, and food far beyond his needs, and so he shuts himself away in self-sufficiency. Now he is in a bad way he has discovered a new relationship with Lazarus, who before he had ignored, and with Abraham, who he must have ignored too, otherwise he would never have behave towards Lazarus as he did.

This is more than just a story about wealth and poverty. It is also a story about seeing an other as a gift. The rich man is given the gift of Lazarus, a man like himself, a man with a unique personality, a man with a story, with a past, a present and a future. This gift is placed at the rich man's door, and he rejects it. He isolates himself in the loneliness of his home and misses the gift in front of his

eyes. He does not see in Lazarus a man worth knowing, and so he ignores him and acts as if he were not there. He will never know the truth about Lazarus. Where did he come from? What is his story? What has brought him to this place of desolation and loss? What does he know, what wisdom could he perhaps share with the rich man, what skills or knowledge could they discuss together? The rich man sees none of this because he chooses to act as if Lazarus did not exist.

The rich man has a heart that is withered and hardened. It is closed to the other, to the man who has become invisible at his gate. He needs some major work done on that heart of his. The scriptures, such as this story but many others too, and the sacraments of the Church are given to us to massage the heart that is hardened and withered, to bring it back into life. All our hearts need a bit of enlivening, and the sense of being a little disturbed by what we hear in Church is the beginning of the healing of the heart.

Too often we make judgements about people without knowing their story. We write them off as too different from us, or too challenging, or too threatening, and so we do not engage with them. This story is partly about generosity to the poor, and that message is a good enough place to start. But really the story is inviting us to live life in a more exciting, and stimulating and challenging way, to see the 'other', the person in front of us as a gift, not a threat or a nuisance. So often, probably unwittingly, we enter into any encounter or any conversation with the intention of getting from it what we can. I want to make my point, put my views across, tell my story, then get out of here. What a difference it would make if we learned instead a real passion for engagement, for really listening to the other, to discovering who they are and what makes them tick. If we could learn to say 'Now, tell me about yourself'. How exciting the world could become if we all became passionate really to engage with the other. So, Lazarus, here is some food, and while you eat it tell me about yourself: what is the story that has brought you here? Where do you hope it will lead you next?