

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Twenty Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
25th September 2022

The story of the rich man and Lazarus, which we hear again today, is very familiar. And like all the familiar stories of the Gospels, we need to make some effort if we are not just going to let it wash over us. Once again, we need to hear this story as if we were hearing it for the first time.

Let's go back a step. St Augustine famously wrote in his 'Confessions': "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." In the light of this quotation, we can read all human life as the soul's restless search for God. All human activity can be seen in that context; that is the deepest motivation for all human behaviour, even among those people who claim there is no God. They cannot avoid the fact that it is in the very nature of every human being to be restless for the perfect rest of being close to God, and the motivation behind all our desires is this search.

Of course, we often misunderstand this inner restlessness, this longing for God, and then we look for him in the wrong places. So, for example, this reading of human behaviour helps us to understand the parable today. The rich man (whose name we never know) is longing to find rest in God. He longs for the sense that all is well, that he has found stability and peace of mind, that nothing can happen to disturb him. This, of course, we know is a longing to be loved by God, because that love is absolute, and no power can rob us of it. But this rich man fails to see that. He doesn't realise that he has a deep longing for God, he just thinks that his riches, and particularly the way in which they set him above – way above – the poor man who he does not even notice, will bring him stability. He longs to feel at a deep level that all is well, and instead of looking for that feeling in friendship with God, he looks for it in material possessions that are so magnificent that they isolate him from other people, and so isolate him from challenge and from danger. Except, of course, they don't. He has allowed his search for God to be hijacked by an idol, a fake, and instead of bringing him security this has brought him isolation and suffering.

Successive popes have used this passage to help us understand better the danger of allowing our longing for God to be pushed out by a longing for material goods. Pope Benedict explains that the great chasm fixed between the rich man and the bosom of Abraham is a chasm of his own making. His whole life has been focussed on isolating himself from the poor so that they pose no threat to him. He has so successfully isolated himself from other people that there is now no way back, stuck beyond a chasm he has created: "*the chasm of being trapped within material pleasures; the chasm of forgetting the other, of incapacity to love, which then becomes a burning and unquenchable thirst.*" (Spe Salvi n44). The isolation that he thought was protecting him, in fact is now torturing him. Stripped of the illusory protection of power and wealth, his self-isolation, made impregnable over a lifetime, is now more torture than defence.

St John Paul II says the same thing – the rich man is not condemned for his wealth, but because he takes no notice of the poor man, he acts as if he simply did not exist, as if he were invisible. St John Paul said:

“The parable of the rich man and Lazarus must always be present in our memory; it must form our conscience. Christ demands openness to our brothers and sisters in need—openness from the rich, the affluent, the economically advanced; openness to the poor, the underdeveloped and the disadvantaged.” (Homily at Yankee Stadium, New York, 2nd October 1979)

This story, then, needs always to be in our minds as we decide how to act, what to do. It is there as a reminder of the danger of allowing our restless search for God to be hijacked by idols that promise much but deliver only misery.

This parable is not, then, some sort of optional extra, it is fundamental to what it means to be human. It reminds us that material goods do not make us safe, and if they do isolate us in some way from one another this is the way to destruction, not to safety. But important as it is, this is not the whole of the message. This message is complete two thirds of the way through the parable, the conversation between the rich man and Abraham adds nothing to this message. But it does add on another message that we cannot afford to ignore. It tells us to listen to the word of God so that we can understand the reality of human existence, or we risk imprisoning ourselves in a cage of our own making. If we listen, and understand the way in which God has created us to find meaning in him, then we will become more and more the sort of people who are fit for Heaven. But if we do not listen, we will inevitably fool ourselves and seek God in all the wrong places, running the risk that we allow our hearts to become so hardened that we make ourselves completely unfit for the Kingdom of Heaven, we become people who simply could never belong there.

The rich man asks for Lazarus to be sent to save him and his brothers. But, of course, the reality is that he has already been sent to save him – he lay day after day on his doorstep to save him, to prise open his heart, but it remained resolutely shut.

Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. All human behaviour is about our search for God, and the ways in which we allow that to be hijacked and subverted by idols. One way in which we do this is by isolating ourselves from the poor and vulnerable so that we no longer see them, but it turns out that this becomes a curse, not a blessing and it leaves us not safe, but very vulnerable.