

## **“Punishment for contempt and indifference to the poor”**

Jesus' parable about a man who had everything he needed and a man who had nothing, turns our understanding of what makes a person happy and successful upside down. In this story Jesus paints a dramatic scene of contrasts – *riches and poverty, heaven and hell, compassion and indifference, inclusion and exclusion*. We also see an abrupt and dramatic reversal of fortune. Lazarus was not only poor, but sick and unable to lift himself. He was “laid” at the gate of the rich man’s house. The dogs which licked his sores, probably might have stolen the little bread he got for himself.

Dogs in the ancient world *symbolized contempt*. Enduring the torment of these savage dogs only added to the poor man’s miseries and sufferings. The rich man treated Lazarus with contempt and indifference, until he found his fortunes reversed at the end of his life! In God's economy, those who hold on possessively to what they have, lose it all in the end, while those who share generously receive back many times more than they gave way.

The name *Lazarus* means *God is my help*. Despite a life of misfortune and suffering, Lazarus did not lose hope in God. His eyes were set on a treasure stored up for him in heaven.

The problem with the rich man was, however, that he could not see beyond his material wealth and possessions. He not only had everything he needed, but he selfishly spent all he had on himself. He was too absorbed in what he possessed so as not to notice the needs of those around him. He lost sight of God and the treasure of heaven because he was preoccupied with seeking happiness in material things. *He served wealth rather than God. “You cannot love God as well as wealth at the same time”*

In the first Reading today, we heard the prophet Amos strongly warning against the rich who oppress the weak and the poor, and pronouncing God's judgment on those who derive their joy and comfort from the miseries of the poor and the weak.

**Today's gospel is unique**, in the sense that it touches a very important aspect of our Christian life. That is, *Eschatology*, the theology of the end of time or of the last days. First it concerns the three very important last things: *death, judgment, and reward* - heaven or hell. Second, it reassures us of the comfort of those who suffer now on earth as Christ promised: "*Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted* (Matt 5, 4).

A very important lesson from today's gospel could therefore, be captured in this popular saying: "*Make hay while the sun shines.*" In other words, we must pay attention to the instructions of the good news of salvation, while there is still ample opportunity for us to do so. Excessive comfort, and enjoyment of affluence here on earth, which does not impart positively on the life of the poor, will not profit us much at the end of time. They will not guarantee our ticket into heaven. Only those who are focused, and not distracted by the excessive comfort of this world will easily notice and attend to the Christ in the "Lazarus" around them.

*Today's joke: A six-year-old boy, back home from his first day at Church, was asked, what he thought of the Holy Mass. "It was OK," he replied, "but I think it was unfair that the pastor at the altar did all the work, and then a bunch of other people came around and took away all the money."*

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