

A Missed Opportunity

When people think about violating God's law they think about sins of commission: doing something prohibited like stealing, harming another, or the like. We often forget that sins of omission – things that we neglect to do – are often even more damaging.

The rich man in Christ's parable (Luke 16:19-31) is not accused of any sin of commission. He is not blamed for being rich any more than Lazarus is praised for being poor: in itself having money is not a sin. We are not told how he made his money. He is not accused of defrauding people as Zaccheus claimed to have done. The only thing he is accused of is not giving alms.

The poor man, Christ says, lay at the rich man's gate, hoping for scraps. It may be easy to ignore a panhandler on the street; it is not so easy to ignore him when he is at your doorstep day after day. Yet this is what the rich man did. He did not overlook abstract appeals from far-away charities; he passed by a flesh-and-blood person in need on his own doorstep, "the living creature," as St John Chrysostom describes him, "for whom God cares" (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

One of the ultimate questions behind this parable is, "What is money for?" In the ethics of the world the answer is clear: money is there for us to buy more and bigger and newer and better. According to the Scriptures, however, though we walk in the flesh, we do not live according to the flesh. We know that our money is the Lord's, however we may have gathered it.

The purpose of money according to the vision of the kingdom of God depicted in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is set forth directly in St Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians (9:8). Our resources are meant to provide us with "*all sufficiency*," meaning everything that we truly need, and "*an abundance*" – everything more than we need – for doing good. Does having multiple cars and homes or a TV in every room fall under the heading of "sufficiency"?

The rich man in Christ's parable may have felt that he "needed" every scrap he had acquired but, as St. John Chrysostom affirmed, he did not know what he needed it for: "If a person enjoys luxury in moderation and distributes the rest to the stomachs of the poor, then his wealth does him good. But if he is going to give himself up to luxury and profligacy, not only does it not help him at all, but it even leads him down to the great pit. This is what happened to this rich man" (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

Devout believers are convinced that they encounter God in worship – in the words of the Bible, in the Eucharistic presence. The Lord taught the very thing: "*Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them*" (Mt 18:20). When the Body of Christ comes together in worship – particularly in the Divine Liturgy – the Head is surely there as well.

But Christ also indicates another instance of His presence in our midst. He affirms that He is present in the needy of this world. In His parable of the last judgment Christ rewards those who fed and clothed Him, who welcomed Him or visited Him when He was sick or in prison. "*Assuredly I say to you,*" He tells them, "*inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to Me*" (Mt 25:40).

In the Liturgy we truly encounter the glorious Christ: the candles, the singing, the incense and the icons all point to Him as He is now: at the right hand of the Father, praised by the saints and angels. But in the poor we encounter the Christ who put aside His glory and took on our broken humanity that we might ultimately share in His divine sonship. The person in need is an icon of the humiliated Christ, the suffering Christ, the dying Christ – as much an icon of Christ in its way as is the Liturgy.

Most of us find it easier to see the Lord of glory in the Liturgy. However, it seems to take a Dorothy Day or a Mother Teresa of Calcutta to see Christ incarnate in human weakness.

These people and many others had clearly learned what the rich man in Christ's parable had not: that the beggar at the gate is one whom God sends as a means for the salvation of the rich.

Are we you and I, amongst this beautiful group of people? I hope so and let us keep on praying for it...

As St John Chrysostom phrased it, "The Rich Man had in Lazarus an opportunity to learn virtue and to show forth love. Instead of accepting Lazarus' help, he betrayed himself with heartless greed and an unwillingness to share his own wealth...For nothing can so make a man an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbours. Indeed, even though you fast, or sleep on hard ground, or even suffer unto death, but should take no thought of your neighbour, you have done nothing great; despite what you have done, you still stand far from this model of a perfect Christian" (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

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