

Homily for Sunday 29th September 2019

In reaching out to others we discover ourselves.

Once again Jesus directs us to think about how we treat the poor. In last week's gospel, if you remember, he told us we should use "tainted" money to win ourselves friends among the poor who can then welcome us into what he described as "the tents of eternity." Today/this evening, we hear about the poor man Lazarus and the rich man who throughout his life remained unconcerned about the plight of his brother. Cardinal Hume, whom many of you will remember – he was the former Archbishop of Westminster - said that he used to shudder whenever he heard this story. How we use our money obviously matters. That's the value of repeating a theme: it hits home harder. St Luke, whose gospel we are following on Sundays this year, brings out Jesus' concern for the poor again and again.

What are we to make of the story? A few things strike me. The rich man does not have a name whereas the poor man does. That's curious. A name is that by which we are known to others. Through my name I exist within a community. The giving a name at baptism is a very solemn moment: God the Father confers the name on the infant through the ministry of the priest and from that moment the Father draws the child into communion with himself.

The fact that the rich man does not have a name suggests that even though, in material terms, he has a fabulous lifestyle, he is profoundly alone. The poor man has dogs to accompany him. They touch him with their tongues. Then the angels carry him to Abraham's bosom: they hold him; they cherish him. We do not know whether the rich man has any table companions. Perhaps he has no physical contact with anybody. A distinct possibility is that he gives himself up to fine dressing and fine dining precisely to compensate for his lack of connectedness with anybody else.

This sense that wealth cuts us off from others and leads to unhappiness is reinforced by our first reading. Here the Prophet Amos lambasts those among his countrymen who are so caught up in finding new delights for their jaded appetites that they are forgetful of everything else. They are certainly forgetful of those around them who are in need. But they are also forgetful of what will lead to their own happiness. They shelter from

the challenges of life by drunkenly sprawling on divans: that's a very evocative picture of some very miserable, out-of-control people.

What's seems clear to me is that, like these revellers, the rich man in the story is profoundly ill at ease. When he dies it is not as if his life had two parts: happiness on earth while being careless of his duties towards others followed by agony in eternity afterwards as a punishment for his lack of charity. The agony began before ever his eyes closed and he was buried. The human person needs others if he or she is to flourish. If the rich man had simply, on one occasion, opened his gates and tended to the poor man's wounds he would have rediscovered the purpose of his life and he would have experienced joy. The tragedy of the story is that the rich man brought unhappiness upon himself needlessly. He became imprisoned behind the gates that shut Lazarus out.

Jesus came, as he announced at the beginning of St Luke's gospel, to set prisoners free. He did that definitively through bursting forth from the tomb on the third day. Now he invites those of us who have been baptised to experience his new and eternal life. He offers us a way out. He wants to rescue us.

This prison is a place that many of us are familiar with. It's our comfort zone. We pride ourselves on being pretty decent people, notwithstanding a few mistakes in the past, and we wish everybody well and, frankly, we don't want to get involved with most people. That's because we belong to this individualistic culture which is so dominant in our society.

Going to Mass is a profoundly counter-cultural thing to do. It represents a break-out from this prison. When you entered this church today you indicated that you want to get involved, that you do not wish to remain behind closed doors, that you care, that you wish to belong to a community. And this community, if it is to be a true community always includes the poor. As Pope Francis has said: "there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor." And he noted also: "Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor ... the culture of prosperity deadens us."

Once when I was a boy I started thinking about the consequences of being a Christian. I decided that it meant that we had to look around for somebody in need and then help them. So I said to my Dad: "Why don't

we invite Mr Warner for a cup of tea?” Mr Warner was a single elderly gentleman who lived next door. He was a private person and I liked him. He used to chat to me over the fence, saying that he didn’t like the northerly wind when it got up. I didn’t really understand what the north wind was but I listened politely. Only now do I realise that Mr Warner probably had no idea what would interest a boy and so reached for a topic with which he was familiar and used that to break the ice. I also didn’t realise, though I do now as I get older, what a great joy it is for an adult to have a conversation with a child who is prepared to listen.

Anyway my Dad, who was also a private man, and shy to boot, was a bit surprised and, I discerned, initially a little reluctant. Inviting Mr Warner round would mean putting our relationship with him on a new footing, one of greater intimacy. However, he put his reservations aside, because – I could see, and this was a revelation to me at the time – he knew that I was right – and he went round and invited Mr Warner to join us for tea and cakes. It was breakthrough moment for all of us and certainly for me one of the most important steps forward in my childhood in my understanding of my faith.

Most of us are waiting for somebody to be kind to us and when somebody is we feel ridiculously grateful for the smallest sign of affection. That’s a sign of our shared vulnerability, our common frailty. The trick of being a Christian is that we don’t wait for the other person to move towards us. We get in there first.