

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

17 Pentecost
September 26, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Hearts of Flesh”

In today's Gospel Jesus tells a parable. A parable was a Hebrew literary device used in the teaching. The word parable means to “lay alongside or to compare.” Jesus' parable in today's Gospel is the story of Lazarus and Dives. Dives is the rich man, and Lazarus is the poor beggar who lived at his gate.

In Luke's Gospel the story is poignant and painful because Luke's Gospel is the Gospel of the sick, the weak, the powerless and the minority. Luke tells his Gospel stories with the “eye of the Physician” that has spent his life among the poor and the sick. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is a Messiah who brings healing and justice in a world that is desperately short of both.

To understand Jesus story you must understand a simple, but basic Jewish truth. In Jesus' day, Judaism taught that riches and wealth were a blessing from God, whereas poverty and sickness came from God's wrath and were a punishment for sin. Jesus' parable must have come as such a shock to the Jewish leadership, because it reversed what had stood for centuries. Luke's Gospel fits with a belief that Jesus brought meaning to suffering and that united to Christ on his cross, Christians can reverse thousands of years of suffering and injustice and build a Kingdom of love.

Let us examine Jesus' story: “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple...” Purple was the Jewish color for royalty and Kingship. It reminded people of King David and his Kingdom. “At his gate lay a poor man Lazarus, covered with sores.” The image must have reminded the listener of the story of Job. But, unlike the story of Job, there is no happy ending; Lazarus dies.

Jesus' parable has Angels carry Lazarus away to be with Abraham. That must have come as such a shock to those hearing it. Abraham was the Father of the Nation, the first of the Patriarchs, the beginning of Faith in Yahweh. What could a sick beggar man have done that deserved a reward like this?

Dives goes to Hell where he can still see Lazarus walking in heaven with Abraham. Suddenly, the suffering of life is reversed and no one can cross the great chasm to comfort Dives.

Immediately, you know that it is not Dives' wealth that has condemned him, but rather his use of it. Dives pleads for his five brothers that Abraham should send Lazarus to warn them, but Abraham replies: “They have Moses and the prophets.” But alas, they have not listened. Dives in desperation cries, “That surely they will listen to one who has come back from the grave!” “Repent!” The word leaves Dives lips. “They will repent.” Abraham tells him: “No, if they have not listened to Moses and the prophets, they will not listen to the one risen from the dead.”

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Maybe, just maybe the last line is added by an over eager Luke and aimed at disbelieving Jews. Since the Gospel is aimed at Gentiles maybe it is not a reference to Jesus own Resurrection.

Whichever, the story has a strong apocalyptic theme. God's justice will come and it will reverse the injustice of the world. Despite the story, leaving Jesus' lips as a warning, it also serves to paint a picture for Christians of how things could be.

This is a story with the most enormous moral imperative. It sits in scripture with all the importance of the teachings found in the Sermon on the Mount. Imagine this morning the Lord Jesus walking up our aisle and turning to stand on this step before you. "What did you mean by this parable?" we ask him.

Jesus looks up and he begins to speak: "My dear people, there are two kinds of people in our lives. People we see, because they are important to us, and people who we do not see, because we think they cannot impact our lives. My story, says that you cannot live knowing that half the world suffers, but you do not. You cannot greet the priest as if he is me, but ignore the little old lady who prepares my altar. Don't you know that I come to you in different forms? Today you see me standing here dressed in the white robe of Resurrection, but yesterday you passed me in the street as I lay drunk in the doorway of a building. Today you look with eyes of compassion at the wounds on my hands and feet; tomorrow these wounds will multiply across your television news screens as I lie among the dead and afflicted of Kajo Keji and Dafur."

My message to you this morning is that I love you! That is why I have chosen you: so that you will continue my work. You will be my Body. You will be my heart and weep with me, at the blight of our brothers and sisters. Most of all I ask you to open your eyes and hearts to one simple truth. I have chosen you; each and every one of you, to be my disciple and to build my Kingdom of love in this place. Here I know I am among old friends. Dives died and no one came for him. Lazarus died and I sent my angels to bring him to the place he belongs.

In a while from now I will send my angels for you also, that where I am, you, too, may be. You will not be alone; for those you have loved wait for you. Continue to live in me as I live in you, that your light may shine for all to see. Remember this, you did not chose me, I chose you. And this is my command to you: "Love one another!"

As we watched Jesus the Lord walk back down the nave and exit through our great red doors, would there be tears in our eyes and lumps in our throats?

I think there would be tears in our eyes. This Gospel should bring tears to our eyes. Yes, we have been blessed. We all live lives where there is little by way of want. This Gospel is not asking for our money, or our houses or even our life style. This Gospel is asking for our hearts. "Give" says Jesus' story, "Not your riches, but a different kind of wealth. Reach inside yourself and bring out the person who is closest to the "Image of God."

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“Give me the heart of stone within you, God tells his people, and I’ll give you a heart of flesh”

“Let my Body, the Body of your Christ, my church, be made up of “hearts of flesh.” Look around you; can’t you see? It is not wealth or riches that will build up my body in this place, but it will be those things that I have taught; love, forgiveness, understanding and listening to my word. Reach out and touch the hand of your neighbor. Stay and take time to share in fellowship. Offer your service, your talent, your sweat, your work that we may all live in the love of our God. Then will people say; “See how these Christians love one another.”

Elizabeth was a lady who lived in the Middle Ages. She lived in a fine castle, with many comforts and hundreds of servants. She knew that all across the country poverty raged. She often pleaded with her husband to help the poor. Alas! Like so many powerful men, he was more interested in war and matters of State. Elizabeth decided to take matters into her own hands. Each day she disguised herself as a peasant woman and with some of her servant women to help her, she traveled the length and breadth of the land by cart. Everywhere she dispensed bread and food to the poor and to the sick. She gave what money and comfort she could. When a great plague swept across the country, she left the castle and dispensed medicines and working night and day she washed and comforted the sick, nursing them back to health or burying them in a Christian grave.

When the plague was gone Elizabeth returned to her castle. Weeks later the King returned from his war. To celebrate his army’s victory he toured the entire country, every town and country village. He was both amazed and delighted that hundreds of thousands of his people turned out to wave and cheer him. He did not know that they were really cheering the woman who sat by his side. For no disguise, no matter how good could disguise Elizabeth the Queen of All Hungary. Today she still reigns as their patron and saint.

In a perfect way Elizabeth’s story demonstrates today’s Gospel: “What is important is not how much wealth you possess, but rather what you do with it.” “Freely have you received” says Jesus, “Freely give.”

Elizabeth gave by serving, because the Gospel of love was written on her heart.

In today’s Eucharist let us pray for all who serve this church, those with hearts of flesh, steeped in the love of the Lord.

Father, bless us we pray. We thank you for your Gospel. Continue to bring it alive in our lives. Where there is sorrow may we bring joy; where there is poverty may we bring the riches of your love; where there is injustice may we bring your righteousness. And may our life’s reward be to dwell in this your House forever and ever.

Amen +

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