26th Sunday in Ordinary Time Peter W. Daino

Sept. 28 & 29, 2019 All Saints Parish, Syr., NY

LAZARUS AND DIVES

When I first arrived in Africa an old missionary gave me this advice: “In a strange and unfamiliar place the key to wisdom is a High Tolerance for Ambiguity.”

The parables of Jesus are strange and unfamiliar places. To get their pearls must sit with their ambiguities. It’s a mistake to allegorize them. In an allegory there are immediate stereotypical associations one makes; such as old is wise and young is foolish, or up is good and down is bad. The parables of Jesus do not work that way. So, with high tolerance for ambiguity let’s take a look at this parable of what happens to the poor man and the rich man.

There are four Ps here: Parable, Players, Punchline, and finally the Pearls.

Parable – The Gospel notes what’s different about Jesus is that he taught in Parables. Just this already tells us much about his message, because the medium is the message. Parables are not for rule-makers, or propagandists. In fact, just the opposite. The purpose of a Jesus Parable is to awaken compassion, while the purpose of propaganda is to suppress compassion.

Okay let’s look at today’s parable about Lazarus and the rich man (known in Latin as Dives). At first glance this parable seems to echo the theme of the Great Reversal. It seems to be a simple restatement of Mary’s Magnificat: The lowly will be raised up, the mighty brought down from their thrones. However, if you look more carefully at the Players you begin to see ambiguities.

The Players – At the beginning of the story there are only two players: Lazarus and the rich man. Note that in Jesus telling of what happens on earth, He only honors the poor man with a name, Lazarus which means “God Helps Us.” The rich man, coming and going out his front gate, does not seem to see Lazarus. Only the dogs see Lazarus, and lick his wounds. A sidebar: In Malawi where I lived for 18 years, the greeting was Mwaona which means I SEE YOU.

Where things get interesting is in the next life. Lazarus rests in the bosom of Abraham. Dives is in hades, tormented by the heat. Though a great reversal has happened, the new set-up has not yet registered in the mind of the rich man. He still thinks he is the boss, the one who calls the shots. He still does not talk directly to Lazarus, rather he instructs Abraham, “Send Lazarus (funny that now he wants to use Lazarus, he knows his name) down here with some water.” When Abraham tells Dives that it’s impossible, Dives makes another command, “Ok then send Lazarus to my five brothers.” The rich man wants to use the poor man sending him here and there as if the poor man is still his to command. The new set-up has not registered in the mind of the rich man who is used to being in charge, in control of every situation on the earth.

Still we have not figured out the parable. There are other ambiguities.

The rich man is not all bad. He loves his five brothers.

Second, the poor man never speaks a word in this parable, but he has the power.

Punchline – Here is the biggest ambiguity. Abraham tells the rich man, that even if one should rise from the dead, and speak to the five brothers, they would not believe. But note, this is Abraham talking. The Old Testament Patriarch isn’t aware of the Good News… that Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, through his Easter Presence is converting the peoples of the known world, among whom might be those five brothers. Moreover, in the epistle of Peter we see the Risen Lord preaching to residents of the netherworld including Dives.

And so the pearls:

* Even when it looks final, it isn’t final, for the rich man or his rich brothers.
* The poor man who seems powerless, and passive, is the action-hero.
* The so-called chasm or unpassable divide between classes of people, the rich and the poor, is not forever.

A Jesus parable is like a joke you don’t get, but later you laugh out loud, Oh, Wow, now I get it. Jesus takes an old story with a traditional meaning and subverts it, makes it a new story, with a surprising twist.

The punchline? Easter! It opens the story for the pearls to drop! The reversal made possible by the Risen Christ is more amazing than what Abraham might have imagined. In the Easter World, divisions come to an end; classes, races, cultures, genders, are all reconciled, there is One Body, One Lord, One Beautiful New Creation! And look, it is the poor man, the crucified one, invisible to most people, who embodies the name Lazarus, God Helps US! God, manifest in the Easter Christ, puts aside what divides us, and finally making us One!