

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME [C]

Amos 6: 1, 4 - 7

1 Timothy 6: 11 - 16

Luke 16: 19 - 31

A recent survey among Funeral Director's revealed that Frank Sinatra's, My Way, was the most requested piece of music - religious or secular - for funerals.

It may be in other areas of the country, but certainly not in Oxford, England.

In my experience, the 'Top of the Pops' for funeral music here is the hymn, All Things Bright And Beautiful.

I guess because it has that idyllic appeal, which invokes nostalgic longings for our childhood when life seemed simple, serene, and uncomplicated.

It also takes people of a certain age back to their school days when they would have sung it - probably every week - at their morning Assembly.

It was written as a hymn for children by Cecil Frances Alexander in 1848; but the version we sing now isn't the original one.

One of the verses in the original has been suppressed because it's no longer 'politically correct.'

"The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate; he made them high or lowly, and ordered their estate."

I'm sure you can understand why it's no longer printed in modern hymn books

But it's what's at the heart of that hymn; it's what its main message is all about, and reflects the social order in Victorian England.

This is an oversimplification I know, but everyone had their place in society, and the world.

If you were born poor, the assumption was that's where God intended you to be, and you had to dutifully bear your position in life.

And the rich were to assist the poor because it was their 'Christian duty;' but it didn't mean lifting them out of their poverty into a better life.

And this parable Jesus tells of the Rich Man and Lazarus has been misused, and misinterpreted to legitimise that gulf between the rich and the poor in so many different ways.

Before going on, it might be as well to say the Lazarus in this story isn't the Lazarus raised from the dead in John's Gospel.

The word Lazarus as it's used here, simply means a beggar.

A cursory reading of the story might seem to tell us that the beggar will have a wonderful time in the after-life, so it's OK if he's ignored and left as he is in this.

But the right of all whom God has created is to: "Have life, and have it to the full." Jn. 10: 10 Not just in the life to come, also in this life too.

However, beyond the physical well-being we all long for, are the questions lurking at the back of everyone's mind.

Is this all there is? What happens to me when I die? Do I just drop off the conveyor belt of life into a black hole?

But Jesus takes us even beyond those - literally - questions of life and death in this parable.

He asks us the ultimate question, upon which eternal life hangs: just as He asked the Disciples at Caesarea Philippi: "But what about you? Who do you say I am? [And] Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Mt. 16: 15 - 16

We could side-step that question - and often do, don't we? - and still think we're salving our consciences by giving to the poor and, thereby, maybe, hopefully, reserving a place for ourselves in heaven.

We're not like the Rich Man who just completely ignores the beggar.

We've given the beggars of our day aid and assistance.

But we can't buy our way into heaven by just filling a Christian charity envelope a couple of times a year.

In this country there are rich and poor, but absolutely nothing like it is in so many parts of the world; though we all know Lazarus from the other side of the world through the television that brings us together.

He's our neighbour who would be glad to change places with us: we would be horrified to share his life, even for a day.

Pope John Paul once said that he believed every human person, at some time in their lives, will be called by Christ to answer that question: 'Who do you say I am?'

I'm convinced he was right: because, as Peter testifies in the Acts of the Apostles: "There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." Acts 4: 12

If that is so, then Jesus will ask each one of us if we want to believe in Him or not.

Our ultimate salvation hangs on our response to His invitation.

You know, there are countless numbers of people in the world, who are far more charitable than many Catholics, and belong to other religions, and none.

They, more often than not, do charitable acts without any thought of reward, in this world or the next.

Unwittingly though they're serving Christ, in whom alone is found salvation, because human beings are made in His image and likeness.

They are, as Cardinal Hume used to call them, 'Secret Christians.'

But Jesus doesn't want them to remain 'Secret Christians;' He wants them to love Him in a bond of intimate friendship.

We can give to the poor until it hurts. But, unless we love them with the love of Christ, and want to bring them to the Lord so that He can give them His life in all its fullness, we're only fulfilling their physical needs.

And very often the poor today are those who, metaphorically speaking, quoting the reading from Amos: "Lie on beds inlaid with ivory, and lounge on couches, dining on choice lambs and fattened calves, [and] drink wine by the bowlful." Amos 6: 4 & 6

People who are comfortably off, but don't know Christ; or if they do, know Him on their terms.

And so we get to the heart of this parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus.

The Rich Man, who's enjoyed the good life in this world, finds himself, through his own actions, outside the orbit of God's love in the world to come.

He pleads for Lazarus to be sent to his five brothers who, from the context of the story seem to be as bad as him, so that Lazarus can warn them what awaits them.

But He's told that they have Moses and the Prophets - the Word of God in the Old Testament - which will lead them to the God who is love.

His retort is that if someone came back from the dead then they'd believe it, and repent of their wicked ways.

But the last words spoken to the Rich Man are these: "If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead." Lk. 16: 31

Jesus rose from the dead, and people didn't believe it - they still don't.

They don't want to: "Hold tightly to the eternal life." 1 Tim. 6: 12 Jesus urges all of us to take hold of.

I know, even in some circles in the Church, it's not cool or popular to mention the word Hell these days; but I'm going to!

God doesn't send us to Hell. We send ourselves there.

It's, as the Rich Man found to his cost, to see God as He really is in the world to come; but because of our lack of love for Him, and each other, in this world, we put ourselves outside His orbit of love for eternity.

At the end of John Milton's Paradise Lost, Michael [the Archangel] leads Adam and Eve from the Garden.

Paradise has been lost.

The poem ends: "The world was all before them; they, hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way." John Milton; Paradise Lost Book XII

May we not experience paradise lost but: "Dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Ps. 23: 6