

Twenty Sixth Sunday of the Year September 25, 2016

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; 1Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

We live in a world which praises achievement and progress and resists and discards any failure. We exist in a society, which says people ought to deserve everything they are able to work for and acquire. The materially successful are often heard of boasting of their personal achievements. The emphasis is not on what people are but what they can do and on what they can acquire with what they do. God speaks to us in many ways and touches our lives but we often fail to listen to him. He speaks to us in gentle ways and guides us in our weakness. The Gospel of today gives us a quick clue regarding the Kingdom values which are different from all worldly values. It tells us that we as the children of God have the obligation and duty to look after our brothers and sisters and care for them. We all belong to one family of God. The parable illustrates the value of the poor in spirit. In the first reading Prophet Amos gives a warning to the people of Israel reminding them that they cannot afford to remain in luxury ignoring those suffering around them. He warns against those who feel secure, are at ease and do not grieve over the ruin of others. In the second reading Paul advises Timothy to be steadfast in his faith and always alert like an athlete who prepared for his final race to win the crown of victory. He urges Timothy to pursue all the virtues necessary for a Christian Leader and thus live up to the Baptismal promises.

Today's First Reading taken from the Book of Amos, written during the time of prosperity and denounces the luxurious living of the leaders of Judah and foretells the retribution that was awaiting them. In this reading we have the last of three woes that the Lord God promised to inflict upon Judah and Israel because of their evil deeds. These nations had rulers who were idle, insensitive to the needs of the poor while they lived in luxury. They failed to recognize their connectedness with others and their responsibility. Accordingly, God said that they would be punished and taken into exile. Amos adds that they would be the first to go into exile. History tells us that the rulers lived in extravagant life style that was a scandal to others. While the well-to-do to whom Amos speaks were living in luxury and sin, there were thousands of their fellow citizens who went short of bare necessities of life. This did not worry these selfish, self-centred egoists. Nor did the warning sent them through the prophet awaken any sense of guilt in their consciences. They continued their evil ways till the wrath of God caught up with them. They were indifferent and insensitive to the needs of others. Because of such unacceptable

behaviour of theirs, the rulers were going to be captured and taken into exile. Their days of celebrating in a total luxurious way would be coming to an end.

The Second Reading of today taken from the First Letter of Paul to Timothy, Paul begins by calling Timothy a "man of God." The title man of God was generally applied to the great figures in the Old Testament such as Moses and to the prophets. The application of this title most likely meant that Timothy was greatly dedicated to the service of God and a person who pursues the virtues befitting a leader of God's people. When Paul tells his beloved disciple Timothy to fight the good fight of the faith, he was stating two things. First, Paul compares the Christian faith to a competitive race. A race involves good competition between different chosen persons. They always compete in order to win. They have to exercise self-control in all things and concentrate on their goal. They do this race in order to receive a perishable wreath. He asks his beloved disciple to find a wreath which is imperishable. Speaking about himself, Paul says that he has fought the good fight, he has finished the race, and he has kept the faith. Secondly, Paul was reminding Timothy that at his baptism, he had made a profession of faith before many witnesses. Before God, the Church and the faithful, Timothy had an obligation to persevere in his faith to the end of the race. Timothy is called upon to persevere to the end and secondly, to preserve the truths of the faith that have been entrusted to us at our baptism.

The parable in the Gospel of today, generally termed as the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, was directed towards the Pharisees. This parable contains the all-important parabolic dynamic of reversal. It begins with the state on earth of the rich person and the poor man and at the end, the reversal of roles. The rich man in the story is nameless but the poor beggar is given the name, Lazarus meaning, the poor of Yahweh, as if to reverse the world's opinion. This nameless rich man had more of this world's wealth than he could ever use. The description of both rich man and poor man are interesting. The rich man is not portrayed as evil or villain and the poor man is not described as particularly virtuous and heroic. The story does not tell us how he got the wealth, perhaps in a proper way through his hard work or he inherited it from his ancestors. He was wealthy. He dressed as a rich man would and had splendid royal living and there was no indication of anything wrong with him. All he did was to enjoy his wealth and his good food, his big house, his fashionable and expensive clothes. He did not seem to have done any harm to anyone, even to the poor man at his gate. He did not drive him away or use abusive language towards him. The rich man was, in fact, quite charitable. The poor man was welcome to any of the food that fell from the table. Perhaps he was

very religious person too, observing his Sabbath and may also have been a good family man. He may have been seen as a very pillar of his community. Yet, as long as that poor man lay uncared for at his feet, visible to him, the rich man was totally negligent, a sin of omission. It looks as if he did not know what justice means, did not know what love means, did not know what a truly human society means, did not know what religion means.

All the parables of our Lord are based on everyday happenings. While we hope and pray that the case of the rich man described is not an everyday occurrence. We cannot doubt but that such cases have happened and will happen again. This rich man had everything a man could desire on earth and he set his heart on his wealth that he forgot about God and human persons. He was not ignorant of God as he was aware of Abraham and Moses and Prophets. He was totally insensitive to the needs of Lazarus. When he died, he could not take his luxury with him in the afterlife. None of his luxury could defend him against the judgment that awaited him. In fact, his luxury condemned him. When Jesus related this story, His intent was to spiritually awaken the Pharisees who were fond of money. As Luke tells us, they "heard all this, and they ridiculed Him." The Pharisees had elevated themselves to the extent that no one, not even Jesus, could correct them for their own salvation. They were beyond reproach. Returning to the rich man and Lazarus, in the days of Jesus, it was understood that Jewish landowners were Yahweh's tenants. That means that the landowner owed God some returns for the land he cultivated as his tenant. Hence they were expected to share the land with them in the form of assistance. Based on this custom, the rich man was obligated to take care of Lazarus, ensuring that his basic needs were met.

Lazarus is presented to us as a person who was not only a destitute but also was suffered physically as well. He bore his lot patiently. He was quite content to get the crumbs from the rich man's table. The reason as to why dogs were hanging around the table is because when the guests were invited to a feast, they would use bread to wipe their plates or their hands and then toss it under the table. Naturally, this would draw the dogs that would clean up the floor by eating what had been dropped from the table. This was the food that Lazarus longed to have so he could survive. The Gospel of Luke tells us that the poor man was sick and weak. He had sores that the dogs would come and lick. Obviously the poor man could not afford medication and the rich man refused to acknowledge his presence and his needs. The story goes further to tell us that both the rich man and the poor man died. The poor man was taken to Heaven by angels and the rich man was sent to Hades where he was tormented. What followed was the rich man's request to Abraham

that Lazarus be sent to him so he could dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue, because he was in agony from the flames. Abraham responds him with the message of the reversal of fortunes. This message reminds us of the last judgment where Jesus rewards those who fed the hungry and so on. Jesus identifies himself with those suffering.

Central to the story is the table laden with food. This is both the symbol of the Kingdom and also points to our Eucharistic table, which we dare to approach every day and every Sunday. The rich man made no move whatever to share what he had at the table. He could have done so at either of two levels. First, he could have seen to it that the poor man had enough to eat and he might even have gone further and looked after his physical welfare. This is at the level of "charity", which most of us feel good about doing. In the second level, neither of the men is seen as rich or poor. They sit down together at the same table and they give and receive and share on a footing of equal dignity the meal and the food. It is quite irrelevant whether one of them is more intelligent, more active, more enterprising and healthier. What is important is that each cares deeply for the other and sees that the needs of each are taken care of with the resources available. The rich man made the excuse that he did not realize what was going on. His brothers did not realize this either. Let them be warned, he pleaded with Abraham. Mind you, even in the place of suffering the rich man could still only think of his own family and not of all the others to whom he was responsible. Abraham responds saying that it would be no use warning them. They would not listen even if someone rose from the dead. Ironic words indeed. Jesus here speaks of his own resurrection and how many really are going to believe in him and his resurrection.

Next, we heard that the rich man requesting Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house to warn his five brothers of the plight that awaited them if they continued to live as the rich man did. Abraham answers him that his brothers had Moses and the prophets. In other words, they had the laws and the words of the prophets. Equally today, we have the Words of Jesus and the teachings of the Holy Catholic Church that are continuously related to us through the ministers of the Word of God. As the rich man had plenty of opportunities to hear the truth, today, God's creations, within and without the Church, have all the necessary opportunities to hear the truth. Sending Lazarus back to earth in spirit form is not going to save anyone. Today, if someone was to see Lazarus, rather than listening to his message of salvation, they would ask him, "How did you do that?" Then they would try to reproduce the same result through scientific means so other souls can travel back and forth between Heaven and earth. They would miss the whole point.

There is a subtle warning that Jesus gives us through the gospel reading. He calls us today to be at the service of the poor and needy for they too are the children of God. He tells us that the chasm between the rich and the poor after they have died is far greater than it was when they were alive. When he was alive the rich man had every opportunity to share his wealth and care for the poor but he did not. The teachings of the law and prophets were available but he ignored them. Today we have the Words of Jesus and the teachings of the Church that are continuously placed on to us. As the rich man had plenty of opportunities to hear the truth, today, God's creations, within and without the Church, have all the necessary opportunities to hear the truth. Sending Lazarus back to earth in spirit form is not going to save anyone. Therefore during the week, let us commit some time to review how we can improve our knowledge of the Catholic faith so when we speak on behalf of the Church, we do so with sound doctrines. We are presented with many tools and we are called upon to make a response. All of these are excellent tools that will richly increase our knowledge of God. We ask the grace that the light that Christ gives us may remove our blindness and make us one with him.

The story is told of a woman who during the war went to live with her husband in camp on the Mojave Desert. She simply hated the place; the heat was almost unbearable, 125 degrees in the shade, the wind blew incessantly, and there was sand - sand everywhere. Finally, in desperation she wrote her parents in Ohio that she couldn't stand it another minute and was coming home. Quickly came the reply by airmail from her father - just the two familiar lines: "Two men looked out from prison bars... one saw the mud, the other saw stars." The daughter did some real thinking, not only with the intellect but also with her heart. She decided to stick to her post. She poured out her love on her husband who responded to her warmly, made a good exemplary family, made friends with the natives, learned to love the country, and eventually wrote a book about it. The desert hadn't changed, but her attitude had. Her family made her the difference. Because she listened with her heart to the words her father sent, a whole New World opened up to her.

It was during the Korean War in 1954. There were the American Soldiers fighting the war in Korea and it was hard. It was the cold winter and the war had moved to the forest area and the Americans became the target. There was knee deep snow and in that situation 43 American Soldiers were captured and were put in a small hut. They had no fire to warm them and did not have sufficient clothes to protect them from severe cold. Only way to warm them was huddling themselves and the body heat would keep them alive. In the group were two persons were sick with diarrhoea and it was not pleasant to have them in the group. Then one soldier got

up, picked one and put him out and came to pick the other and did the same. Both the soldiers died instantly. No one said anything. The war was over and the forty one were rescued. Someone told of the episode and there was the psychological court martial. There was one accused and forty witnesses. They were asked the same three questions: did you see what was happening and all answered and said they did see it all. Second was they knew what would happen and all said that they knew of instant death. The final question asked was why you didn't do anything and each answered the same way: it was none of my business. The other is not my business.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India