Dives & Lazarus

Before Mass:

Our Gospel today presents the parable rich man, aka Dives, and Lazarus. It ties in quite well with the first reading, about living in luxury while being complacent to the needs of the poor, even though the Amos was preaching to folks centuries before Jesus. That can tell us something … the message is timeless.

Here is what I ask you to do. Listen to the Gospel: what are the bad things, things that lead to a bad outcome for Dives and his brothers, things we hope to avoid? What, if changed, could lead to a happy ending for not only Lazarus, but for the rich man, his family, and for us?

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Now, what are some of the things in this parable that are unfortunate, a sad state of affairs? Here is my list:

- Lazarus’ suffering … his hunger, his sores, his being ignored; being walked by as if he didn’t exist. Often those who are suffering can feel invisible, as if no one even sees what they are going through.
- The rich man’s indifference to Lazarus. His blindness. He must be so preoccupied with his wealth and with luxury that he doesn’t even notice Lazarus.
- The subsequent suffering that Dives, the rich man experiences: alienation from God.
- Even at the end, the rich man can only see Lazarus as a servant to help him: father Abraham, send Lazarus here, send him there (He still doesn’t even speak to Lazarus.)
- The chasm between eternal comfort and eternal torment.
- The sad state of the rich man’s brothers who wouldn’t even listen if someone rose from the dead (which of course did happen! Recounting the parable, Luke is reminding us that Jesus did rise from the dead. Christ does try to warn folks, even today!)

I think the chasm really is key. At the beginning of the story, the life, the experience, the world in which Lazarus lives is miles apart from the life, experience and world of the rich man. The rich man, Dives, had no clue about Lazarus’ suffering. Never having experienced such hardship, never being close to someone who had, he had little to relate to in Lazarus’ world. Maybe he had been taught not to notice such things: notice the suffering in the world, you might be expected to respond. Perhaps he had been taught that the poor are poor because they don’t help themselves, or some other pathetic, self-justifying excuse for complacency.

I see the chasm at the end of the story as an expansion of the gap between the rich and the poor that begins the story. But here is a critical point, a piece of truly hopeful, good news. On this side of life, it is possible to cross the gap, the chasm. To travel from one side to a person on the other. We can reach out, to help those suffering at our door. We can, even if only in some small way, enter the world of the less fortunate. Cross the gap in this life, and we can avoid the chasm
growing ever wider, until it is uncrossable in the next. Move beyond blindness and complacency, and Lazarus becomes your brother.

Let’s say there has been sin in our life, and upon death, a bit of purification is needed, that purifying we name purgatory. Treated like a nobody, why would a Lazarus we ignored in this life be of help? Lazarus wouldn’t even know us. But any Lazarus who was treated like a brother in this life can certainly reach out to someone being purified after death, and lead them to the bosom of Abraham. There is a traditional teaching that those we have helped in this life are the ones who welcome us to heaven. That rings true, doesn’t it?

Here is a deeper way to understand that noticing and responding to Lazarus in this life can make a world of difference. In this Gospel Jesus is giving a warning to the Pharisees, who seem to be on the same path as the rich man in the parable. Elsewhere, Jesus tells us that in feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and those in prison, we are reaching out to him. Providing Lazarus some help is a way to discover Christ, to get to know Christ, and to find salvation through Christ. The mystery that leads us to heaven is the paschal mystery. We begin to live it the more we know Christ. Knowing Christ in those who suffer is a powerful way to TRULY come to know Christ, the real Christ who still offers himself to the Father in those who suffer with him.

In other words, the story would have had a happy ending if the rich man noticed Lazarus, and offered him some food. If he tended to his wounds, or saw that he got some care. If he got to know Lazarus as a person, just like himself, not as servant to order around. He may even have begun to see Christ in Lazarus. That could open the door not only to being more compassionate, but to dying to self, and rising a new person. Our rich friend could have begun living the paschal mystery in this life, and that mystery could have reached its fulfillment when he died, the final dying to self and rising in Christ.

Jesus tells us this parable so that we can understand how to avoid an inseparable Chasm. He wants our story to have a happy, a blessed ending. He wants the Lazaruses in this world to have comfort, through his disciples, you and me. Who knows, one day we may be a Lazarus. Jesus wants all who are Lazarus and all who are rich to be brothers and sisters, and wants all to live so as to find peace at the bosom of Abraham.

So in our Eucharist, we pray that our eyes are opened to Lazarus at our door. We pray for the grace, the compassion, courage to respond. We pray that we don’t put off responding, but that we make it a priority, in the time that God has given us: today. Most of all, lets pray that we all truly encounter Christ in others. That the encounter will lead us to walking with Christ. Let us pray that in the journey, we will be transformed into disciples, prepared not only enter heaven, but able to lead others on the way as well.