

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 29th 2013

When I was a young and very pious religious our days were compartmentalized, that is, they began and ended by bells. There was this huge old swinging bell that woke us all up, (including God), at five in the morning. One time some lively characters climbed up the tower and stuffed the bell with newspapers so as to silence its tongue. Eventually Ordo Regularis was restored.

Our morning prayer-time was segmented into three twenty-minute sections, and yes, the little bell either woke us up again or invited us to quit dreaming and get back to prayer. We did things by the book and bell. When studying, a bell would ring and we would move from one subject to the next in our private rooms.

Mass had its place and time. There was a problem there though which lingers even to this day for me and us. When the bell rang, mass was over and breakfast was next. We had done the liturgy and now it was on to the next and then the next. We left mass behind, it was the early-morning celebration and we were there, but it ended.

The liturgy ends, but the continuation or effects of that sacramental encounter drifted off with the sounds of the bells. What is wonderfully new is that the Mass does not end! We actually are sent, bells or no bells, to embread ourselves. We prepare for the next Eucharist by being the grace we have received. The liturgy begins the continuation. The liturgy takes a speck of time to consecrate our time and all time.

We do not do the “God Thing” and then get on with our time. The Eucharist departmentalizes life and my actions after the liturgy become as holy as the actions we perform within the liturgy. Everything is holy now and now and now again. We have no bells in our little house, but we do try to live the actions we perform.

REFLECTION

Amos, who was a “trimmer of Sycamores” and a simple shepherd, has been given the prophetic word to address to the fat-cats humming strumming away their lives. Whatever was passing for luxurious the religious leaders were indulging in it early and often.

There is going to be a time of change for them, not only because of their wanton ways, but their lack of concern for “Joseph” which is one of the names for Israel. Their hangover will be in exile and Israel will also suffer the consequences of their disinterest. It seems the truth again that where there is a lack of care and compassion, or where there are addictions or indulgence, others suffer. It is not a tragedy that a tree falls in the woods, but that it falls on smaller trees to their destruction.

It is very important to listen to the parable in terms of exactly to whom it is addressed. Some parables are addressed to the followers of Jesus and they are usually a description of some aspect of God. The parables addressed to the Pharisees are directed at their lack of concern for the poor and needy. This is the theme of today’s Gospel.

There is a rich man and his self-preoccupation prevents him from tending to the poor man at the rich-man’s gate. Both die and the rich man goes to a place of great want and deprivation. The poor man is pictured as being in the abundance of God’s covenantal love. This is the first part of the parable.

The second part has to do with the conversation Lazarus, whose name is taken to mean, “The One God Cares For”, has with Abraham and the suffering rich man cries out for just a little something. Now remember, the Pharisees hold fast to the traditions of Abraham and now they hear Abraham telling the rich man that he had much during his life, but forgot that all was not just for him. The parable is beginning to tighten their shoes.

The rich man asks for help for his father and brothers, but Abraham tells them that the father and brothers have Moses and the prophets for enough guidance. See, the parable is explaining to the Pharisees that they too have not only Abraham, but Moses and the prophets to assist them in how they are to live, especially in relationship with the poor. The conversation is not over yet.

The rich man asks that Lazarus be allowed to go, somebody from the dead whom the father and brothers would certainly listen to. Then the important line which ends the Gospel’s reading. The Pharisees will have a Someone rise from the dead and they will not listen to Him. The message is clear. Abraham, Moses, the prophets within the religious tradition of the Pharisees all have been saying the same things about caring for the orphans, widows, the sick and needy. Jesus is saying the same thing and the Pharisees continue arguing the point.

The rich man kept Lazarus at a safe distance. He refused to reach out to touch, a very needy person. He also resisted being touched by the poor man. Here is just a simple statement. Every person I know who has been touched through their personal contact with the poor, in its many forms, is a deeper person for that contact. That depth has to do with the awareness of the more important values of life. Generally speaking one might notice that the rich are forced to live more on the surface where wealth is easily displayed. So then they are the poorer in spirit and in relationships. Lazarus had something of real worth to offer the rich man and when death came, the transmission of Lazarus' gifts became impossible. Maybe it is this: the less our hands are wrapped around things for our identity and meaning, the more they will be open and available for receiving and sharing. Gratitude results in generosity. This generosity is not merely giving away, but also being available with time for receiving others, especially the poor. To receive is sacramental. To grasp, cling to, and protect as ultimate, is sacrilegious.

“Remember your word to your servant o Lord, by which you have given me hope. This is my comfort when I am brought low.” Ps. 119, 49-50

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