

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

There is a fairly loud note sounding out from today's readings on consideration for the poor and disadvantaged. And yet it is not so much about the poor as about the powerless, which includes the defenceless who have no social or financial status, the incapable, the lost and confused. These are the people that Jesus referred to as 'the little ones', e.g. *Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones* (Matthew 18:10).

Amos 6:1, 4-7 Last week we heard Amos being starkly critical of the monied classes taking advantage of the needy and the ordinary folk. In today's extract we feel the heat of his anger against the complacent self-indulgence of the well-heeled leading citizens in both the northern and southern cities of Samaria and Jerusalem. The prophet reacts harshly as he describes their attitude as *sha'anan* – being at ease, idle and carefree in their ill-gotten luxury.

The battlers feel the burden of complete economic uncertainty

Amos then rails at the opulent pursuits of the rich, sprawling on expensive divans, eating choice lamb and veal in a society where meat in general was a luxury, bellowing out their songs, quaffing wine by the litre and pampering their bodies with high-priced oils and moisturisers. Meanwhile the battlers and the penniless go without, in order to pay taxes and meet their obligations. They stress over their inability to adequately feed their families and feel the burden of complete economic uncertainty.

The only upbeat note in Amos' attack is that these self-indulgent rip-off merchants will meet their comeuppance. He reminds them that their self-importance is fake, and he declares ironically that the only leadership role they will play in society will be to lead their people into exile. Amos insists that God will not tolerate dissolute luxury, exploitation of the powerless and lack of concern for moral and spiritual values. The prophet predicts bad times ahead as a form of divine punishment.

Psalms 145/146 The psalm echoes the theme of today's readings and is a song of reassurance that God lifts the burdens of the oppressed and feeds the hungry. The poet contrasts God's support for the widow, the orphan and the defenceless with the treacherous duplicity of evildoers. The Lord loves the honest person who strives for wholeness.

1 Timothy 6:11-16 In the previous verses Timothy was advised that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils and that greed and hankering after wealth and possessions have led otherwise good people to abandon their allegiance to Christ. The keynote here for Timothy is perseverance in his life of commitment to the person and values of Jesus Christ. The clear implication is that Timothy's spiritual growth and his dedication to ministering to his community are inseparable.

A gentle person does not have to prove anything or be a winner

The notion of gentleness or meekness in this passage translates a rare Greek word *praupatheia* that implies a careful consideration for others and a willingness to refrain from insisting on one's rights. In other words, a calm graciousness and the wisdom and ability to let some things go. A gentle person does not have to prove anything or be a winner. Such people are content in their own skin and can accept others where they are at. They have the capacity to form balanced and mature relationships.

Luke 16:19-31 This is the familiar parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and it occurs only in Luke's gospel. Throughout his gospel Luke emphasises the reversal of values that Jesus represents. From Mary's Magnificat to the mission statement of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth and on to other notable episodes Luke portrays Jesus reaching out with particular focus on the poor and the powerless. So, with the opening sentence of this parable we are geared up to anticipate a dubious, if not disastrous outcome for the rich man.

The characters in the parable are pitched at extreme poles of rich and indigent. The rich man represents those segments of upper-class Palestinian Jews who imitated Roman styles of ostentatious wealth, while the poor man, who is the only human character in a parable of Jesus mentioned by name, can't even get leftovers from the rich man's table. His longing for food is never noticed or satisfied. In fact, the dogs are more compassionate than the fellow

humans of this down-and-outer. His ulcerated body suggests a medical condition that prevents him from securing gainful employment. By the way, Lazarus is a short form of the Aramaic name Eleazar, meaning God helps, which is a pointer to the ultimate destiny of this unfortunate human being.

The essence of the plot, however, takes place after each man dies. Lazarus does not appear to rate a dignified burial and yet he is carried by angels, like a virtual celebrity, to be with Abraham, representing paradise. The rich man,

however, does get a proper burial, but then he is 'buried' in Hades, which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew *she'ol*, the abode of the dead. In the New Testament Hades is a place where sinners are tormented after death.

We get some idea that the rich man is being punished for his total insensitivity and disregard for the poor, but we never get any kind of estimate of the moral character of Lazarus. There is really no need to account for his extraordinary good fortune. At the same time, it would be a misinterpretation of the parable to imagine that | paradise is an automatic destiny for humans who endure poverty and suffering in life. What does strike us, though, is the

reversal of values and situations in this story.

Lazarus sits in intimacy with Abraham while his opposite number writhes in agony in flames. Are there spiritual flames that can burn a spirit? But away with nonsensical questions and just relish the meaning of the metaphors! Notice the enormous distance between the two characters now, and the fact that the rich man mentions Lazarus by name. He never even noticed him before, sitting as a beggar at his gate, or maybe he did, and purposely ignored him. Now he wants Lazarus to be sent (like a servant?) to slake his thirst. But that's not going to happen.

They have the Scriptures to inform their values and priorities

As a backup possibility could Lazarus be sent to the rich man's family to warn his five brothers to lift their game? Even in Hades the sorry wretch is still in master-servant mode. It seems the penny hasn't fully dropped yet, even though realisation is dawning that his behaviour in life was severely wanting. Abraham has to explain that the brothers have the Scriptures to guide their living and inform their values and priorities. After all, these are revelations from God. No, says his suffering nibs, implying that his brothers are not paying any attention to Scripture, but if Lazarus appears to them from the dead they will sit up and take notice and then repent.

What! They need to repent? Then they are obviously offside and on the downhill run to the inferno. They are too far gone, so somebody coming back from the dead will not have any life-changing effect on them. There is a pretty clear connection here with the Lazarus of John 11 whom Jesus brings back from the dead, but whose resurrection has no apparent impact on the opponents of Jesus. It also seems fair to conclude that John has drawn on this parable in Luke for his Lazarus narrative. In similar fashion, the resurrection of Jesus failed to have any impact on many of his Jewish contemporaries.

This concludes Luke's focus on the use and abuse of riches. It is not wealth that is the problem; it is greed and grasping that can lead to a self-serving and complacent life that ignores others 'who are not like me.' Privilege brings with it obligations as emphasised in our reading of Amos and the words of Jesus through Luke.

A final thought: what harm do we risk doing to our fellow human beings and the planet in general if we indulge in conspicuous and uncaring consumption?

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A little consideration, a little thought for others, makes all the difference.

Winnie-the-Pooh A. A. Milne

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I broke a mirror yesterday. I'm supposed to get seven years bad luck, but my lawyer thinks he can get me five.

Steven Wright

Laurie Woods