

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS (LUKE 16:19-31)

Today's Gospel exposes the truth about life after death, and also reveals one very important principle: we cannot achieve eternal life without struggle. Also, through this Bible story Christ reminds us that wealth without virtues is pure wickedness.

“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.”

This is the picture of the two very different realities that exist within this world. One man was so wealthy that he didn't need to work and devoted his life chasing entertainment with his friends. He had food and drinks in abundance, a massive comfortable, warm house and he wore only expensive and luxury clothing. He had servants working for him and he had no earthly problems in his life. The other man, named Lazarus, lived right in front of his gate. He was homeless, hungry, thirsty, sick, physically so weak that he couldn't stand on his feet. Even wild dogs that are considered unclean animals come and licked his sores. The only thing he ever wanted was a bit of leftovers from the rich man's table, but that never happened. Not because they were not aware of his presence. It's impossible not to see someone who's permanently living in front of your entrance. They saw Lazarus through their own eyes, but they couldn't find mercy for him within their stone-hardened hearts. He was physically very visible, but Lazarus was not important to them.

“So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom.”

Another reality Christ explains is the physical death of both men. Since Lazarus was a beggar there wasn't a proper funeral for him. Without anyone knowing and without any ceremony, he was simply thrown into a mass grave with other beggars. The rich man had a proper funeral with a lot of people attending. In eulogies, they spoke about his achievement highly: how he was a great man, successful, highly respected, loving and compassionate, and sadly missed by many. All of the above we could see with our own eyes if we lived back then. But, we cannot see everything in this life with our own eyes. There is a spiritual reality hidden from us for now, but it will be revealed once our souls leave our bodies. In that reality, Lazarus who was rejected, cast out and not noticeable during his earthly life, was carried away by angels to Abraham's bosom. Patriarch Abraham who is a symbol of righteousness means eternal life for Lazarus. On the other hand, the fact that the rich man's name hasn't even been mentioned means that he is forgotten for eternity. He ends up being in Hades.

“The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said: “ Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.”

Being in the dark and terrible place, far away from God's warmth, suddenly he sees and recognizes patriarch Abraham, and begins talking to him by calling him “father”. That clearly shows one important thing: the rich man possesses sound knowledge of the Old Testament. However, he also recognizes Lazarus, which is the proof that he knew him during his earthly life but Lazarus was not significant enough to have any contact with him. From the fact that he's asking Abraham to send Lazarus to relieve his agony, we learn that not even sufferings can soften a stone-cold heart. For the rich man, Lazarus is still someone whose sole purpose of existence is to serve him and make his life more comfortable.

“But Abraham said: “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.”

Abraham simply reminds the rich man that God knows how both of them lived during their earthly lives. Because he was self-centered and obsessed by his wealth he didn't even try to live a virtuous life. That is the reason why he ends up in a place of sufferings, far away from God. Not

because he was rich, but because he lived a reckless life. Wealth without virtuousness is the great killer of souls. The result of that is obvious: he did not show mercy towards a man who was dying of starvation in front of his gate. On the other hand, Lazarus who was homeless, sick, naked, hungry, thirsty and full of sores, still stays in communion with God. He doesn't curse and doesn't blame God for his sufferings. He doesn't try to steal or take away from others. Carrying immeasurable physical pain he still keeps his soul clean. That is the reason why he was taken to the Kingdom of Heaven. Not because he was a homeless beggar and extremely poor.

“And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.”

Hell is the place that is separate from God and “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). That “gulf” is not simply a rift that cannot be bridged. Abraham here talks about natural separation between life with God (virtuous Christ-like life) on the one side of that gulf, and life without God (egoistic human-centered life) on the other side of that gulf. In other words he is saying that people who don't want eternity have nothing in common with people who want to have eternal life. When the separation of soul and body happens our spiritual eyes will be opened and we will be able to see everything clearly. If we end up in Hell, the torment will start immediately because now we comprehend everything but the final outcome cannot be altered. Why? God doesn't need slaves to serve him in fear. He needs free people that will be in communion with Him only out of love. Communion with God can be achieved only during our earthly life.

Then he said:” I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.” Abraham said to him:” They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.”

Realizing that he cannot alter the final outcome, the rich man is now asking Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to change their lives. While they are still alive, they can repent and avert ending up in that terrible place of suffering where he is. Abraham simply points that they already have “Moses and the prophets”, in other words, they already have The Old Testament with all necessary instruction.

And he said:” No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” But he said to him:” If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.”

The rich man knows very well his own brothers. He is aware that they are proficient in The Old Testament and understand the commandments of God, but unfortunately they don't live according to God's law. Still, he's hoping that a miracle can cause their repentance and lead them onto the path of righteousness. However, Abraham knows that even if they've seen someone who was resurrected from dead, they would again find an excuse to reject life according to God – a virtuous life. His brothers already had The Old Testament but they've chosen life without God.

This Gospel is a great warning for all Christians. Apart from the Old Testament, Christians also have the New Testament and God is fully revealed as Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is present in the Church through the Holy Sacraments. Today we know more and see further than people before Christ. By reading the New Testament we learn everything Christ spoke, but still we have to outgrow our own narcissism and learn to love and care for others. That is how we make Word of God – Gospel, alive in us. Without good works our faith is not alive. **“Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:17).** Christ says the same: **“But why do you call me Lord, Lord and not do the things that I say?” (Luke 6:46).** Also, **“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21).** The will of our Heavenly Father is to fulfill teachings of Christ and to strive to be Christ-like. That is the reason God the Father allows His only Son to be born as a human. Jesus should be the role model for all humans who want to be in communion with God. If we truly follow Christ, we'll live, think and work as Christ. Christ is asking from us that regardless of our social status, education, ethnic background or anything else, we accept and respect every single human as Himself. We should try to feed the hungry, give drink

to the thirsty, care for the homeless, give clothes to the naked, visit the sick, support the captives... (Matthew 25). If we help the people, that will be viewed as if we helped Christ Himself:"

Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:40). God was asking exactly the same in the Old Testament. **"I desire mercy and not sacrifice." (Prophet Hosea 6:6).** The rich man and his brothers knew that very well. If we neglect our fellow human who is in need, then any sacrifice we offer to God becomes worthless. This also includes fasting, prayer, and any other effort we make. Christ also repeats this commandment in the New Testament – Matthew 9:13. Patriarch Abraham is a great example of someone who was rich, but also righteous. He is numbered among the saints because of his virtuous life.

Regardless of our social status, the only thing we will be judged by God is our life according to Christ. Did we try during our earthly lives to be Christ-like? Was Christ our role model? Or did we ignore our heavenly calling and completely dedicate our life to chasing wealth, glory, fun, entertainment, food, drinks, holidays, excitement and many other things that are here today and are gone the same moment we experience them? If we devote our life to temporal things, then our life ends in this temporal reality. There is no place for us in eternity, not because God is not merciful, but because we rejected eternity.

Christians living in the 21st century are especially under constant pressure because our godless so-called "modern society" is trying to change the definition of a human being. Through science, culture, medias, music, film and many other things, humanity is currently robbed of its spiritual nature. Humans are reduced to the level of an animal. The meaning of life is portrayed as fulfillment of bodily urges and desires. The purpose of life is depicted in chasing wealth, luxury living, "fun", endless entertainment, expensive foods and drinks, branded clothing and many other fleshly pleasures. The role model for younger generations is a greedy, self-centered and merciless human – **someone who's exactly as the rich man from today's Gospel.** To be "terribly" rich, without any problems in life and without any responsibility towards other humans and nature around us, is the ultimate goal of today's generations growing without God. To achieve "personal happiness" any mercilessness towards humans and nature is allowed. Permitted mercilessness in reaching your "personal ambitions" are simply explained as a "strong personality."

People trying to live a moderate life and to practice Christian virtues are branded like "losers". Love, compassion, temperance and many other virtues are by "the new age" anthropology seen as qualities of a "weak personality". Being compassionate to people in need is just a waste of time in a race to material wealth and "personal happiness".

Jesus Christ is reminding us through this Gospel that material wealth carries also certain responsibilities towards other humans and the nature. But that's not something "modern humans" want to hear. It is much easier to chase and have wealth without any responsibilities. Starting wars, stealing natural resources, exploiting third world countries, leaving people without pensions and health care, bringing animal species to extinction, polluting Earth, poisoning someone else's water, food and air, human trafficking... The list is endless. Without God in our lives other humans are becoming just objects whose sole purpose is to serve us and make our life more comfortable. If we can't use them for our gain, then they are not important to us. The rich man and his brothers couldn't use Lazarus for anything, so they didn't bother with his existence. He was starving in front of their gate, and yet it was as if he didn't exist at all for them.

This is why Christ and His Gospel are not popular in "modern society" which is based exclusively on pursuing hedonism. Christ is calling humanity through His Gospel to fight and overcome greed and self-centredness and to learn how to love each other and take care of each other. Being busy by pursuing our own careers and taking care of our own families is not a reason to close and harden our hearts for Christ who lives in people around us.