

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time C:  
September 25, 2022  
*The Kingdom of "Me, Myself, & I"*

If you have not had the chance to read the Holy Father's book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, you are missing a wonderful opportunity to discover a unique outlook on the person of Jesus Christ. I am borrowing liberally from His Holiness this week-end to try to better understand the lesson Jesus teaches us in the famous parable of the Rich Man, often known as *Dives*, and Lazarus.

Why do I entitle this article *The Kingdom of "Me, Myself, & I?"* Very simply, when I was a young man in college, many of the seminarians of the 1970's and even many of the professors were very much convinced that this parable of Jesus dealt with economic matters; that is, the main problem with the Rich Man, Dives, was that he was, quite simply, *rich*. And Lazarus, on the other hand, was good, because he was poor. When I was young, I strongly suspected that there was something very wrong with this logic, but, being young and inexperienced, and not very good at logic, I couldn't argue the point very well. In any event, the problem with the Rich Man was not his riches, but with his lack of vision. All he could see was *himself* and *his pleasure*. If one stops to think for just a moment, Dives became so caught up *in himself* that he became blind – oblivious – to everything and everyone else around him. The problem with the Rich Man was not his riches but the way he used his riches, in that his riches became a vehicle which – at least in his mind – entitled him to become the centre of his own universe. This is the problem we need to examine.

Interestingly, the Holy Father devotes a chapter in his book to this parable. He spends a short while looking at the background out of which Our Lord would have drawn this story, namely, the Psalms. The Jewish people, really all of us at one time or another, have struggled with a basic question: how is it that bad things happen to good people? Gazing at Psalm 44: "*Thou hast made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those about us... Nay, for Thy sake we are slain all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter*" (Ps. 44. 15-23; cf. Rom. 8. 36) the Holy Father observes:

The early wisdom of Israel had operated on the premise that God rewards the righteous and punishes the sinner, so that misfortune matches sin and happiness matches righteousness. This wisdom had been thrown into crisis at least since the time of the Exile. It was not just that the people of Israel as a whole suffered more than the surrounding peoples who led them into exile and oppression – in private life, too, it was becoming increasingly apparent that cynicism pays and that the righteous man is doomed to suffer in this world. (1)

Picture in your mind the Rich Man, Dives, dining each day, living the good life. The Holy Father adds a detail about those scraps that Lazarus would have liked to have eaten that I never knew. Listen:

... the rich man, who carouses in his life of luxury, and the poor man, who cannot even catch the crumbs that the rich... drop from the table – according to the custom of the time, pieces of bread they used to wash their hands and then threw away. (2)

Do we not have a picture of blind cynicism in the person of Dives? And, if you or I were Lazarus, seeing this utter, useless waste in the midst of human need, would we not be in grave danger of becoming angry, not only at Dives (that would certainly be justifiable) but at God, as well, perhaps so angry that we would be in danger of losing our faith?

This is why the Holy Father reminds us of the wisdom of the Psalms...but let the Holy Father explain it in his words since he does a much better job than I:

The suffering just man who sees all this [evil] is in danger of doubting his faith. Does God really not see? Does he not hear? Does he not care about man's fate? "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken, and chastened every morning. My heart was embittered" (Ps. 73. 13ff). The turning point comes when the suffering just man in the Sanctuary looks toward God and, as he does so, his perspective becomes broader. Now he sees that the seeming cleverness of the successful cynics is stupidity when viewed against the light. To be wise in that way is to be "stupid and ignorant... like a beast" (Ps. 73.22). They remain within the perspective of animals and have lost the human perspective that transcends the material realm – toward God and toward eternal life. (3)

It is not wealth that made Dives wicked; it was the way in which Dives allowed himself to be consumed by his wealth. On the other hand, it was not his poverty that made Lazarus a good man. Poverty does not guarantee personal sanctity. Yet the fact remains that the Lord looks with special care on the poor and expects each and every one of us to do so, too.

This Gospel passage has nothing to do with economics, as the Holy Father points out: "This has nothing to do with a cheap condemnation of riches and of the rich begotten of envy." (4) After all, the Holy Father reminds us that it is two very wealthy men that will take care of the Lord's body after His death to help Our Lady.

What this Gospel passage *is* about is an awakening... this Gospel calls us to see the poor around us, which includes, by definition, a broadening of our own personal horizons and perspectives – my universe must be bigger than myself – it must be big enough to include my neighbour, even God, Himself. I think it was St. Francis who put it so perfectly: We are all poor in

the sight of God. It is when we forget this simple insight that we are in danger of – each one of us – becoming a universe unto ourselves – or, as I said, a “*Kingdom of Me, Myself, & I.*”

Rather, the Gospel calls us to see, *truly see*, one another, and, in seeing one another, to find the Lord Jesus in the other. When I first wrote this article, Holy Father Pope Benedict had just returned from his trip to Great Britain, there to rouse the Faithful, and there, too, to propose to the world that Faith and Reason can once again come together to form a fruitful dialogue. His Holiness sought to bring the light of the Gospel to a world that seems to want to walk in darkness. With that in mind, I leave you with the words of one of England’s greatest modern poets, G. K. Chesterton:

#### THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Said the Lord God, “Build a house,  
Build it in the gorge of death,  
Found it in the throats of hell.  
Where the lost sea muttereth,  
Fires and whirlwinds, build it well.”

Laboured sternly flame & wind,  
But a little, & they cry,  
“Lord we doubt of this Thy will,  
We are blind & murmur why,”  
And the winds are murmuring still.

Said the Lord God, “Build a house,  
Cleave its treasure from the earth  
With the jarring powers of hell  
Strive with formless might & mirth  
Tribes & war-men, build it well.”

Then the raw red sons of men  
Brake the soil & lopped the wood,  
But a little and they shrill,  
“Lord, we cannot view Thy good,”  
And the wild men clamour still.

Said the Lord God, “Build a house,  
Smoke & iron, spark & steam  
Speak & vote & buy & sell;  
Let a new world throb & stream,  
Seers & makers, build it well.”

Strove the cunning men and strong,  
But a little and they cry,  
“Lord, mayhap we are but clay,  
and we cannot know the why,”  
and the wise men doubt to-day.

Yet though worn & deaf & blind,  
Force & savage, king & seer,  
Labour still, they know not why;  
At the dim foundations here,  
Knead & plough & think & ply.

Till at last, mayhap, hereon,  
Fused of passion & accord,  
Love its crown & peace its stay,  
Rise the city of the Lord,  
That we darkly build to-day.”(5)

1. His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York, 2007, pg. 212
2. *Ibid.*, pgs. 211-212
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 213
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 214
5. G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton*, Dodd, Mead & Co., Publishers, New York, 1980, pgs. 132-133