

Sermon for the 21st Sunday After Pentecost The Homily on the Rich Man and Lazarus

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It was said once by a venerable ascetic (who lived here in America not long ago) that when we go to the Judgment Seat of Christ our God He will not ask us if we were a Patriarch, a president or a pauper....rather, the question for us will be “what is in your heart?” For it is within our own hearts, because of the lives that we are leading right now, that we ourselves will carry heaven or hell with us into eternity. (The Lord spoke concerning this saying “the Kingdom of Heaven is within.”)

Many people in our modern “sophisticated” times say and try to convince others of their own personal opinion that hell does not exist. These people speak of “a God without wrath Who brings men without sin into a Kingdom without a judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross¹.” The gamble is incredibly great for those who take this modern view of an automatic salvation for all (incidentally, this view has already been condemned as a lie by the 5th E.C. in the 6th century) for if we do believe this, we might very well live with eternal regret. Can we honestly say that the unrepentant murderer will stand before the Throne of the All Holy God with the Righteous enjoying the same everlasting delight? If we as mortals can barely look at the sun which shines in the sky, how will we be able to bear without divine grace and assistance the sight of the *Creator* of the sun, which in comparison will seem like darkness? (And yet for those around us, and those who have passed on, it is for God to judge, not us, for we must never take the Last Judgment from God.)

In today's Gospel, we heard the story of the Rich man who was buried and went to a place of torment (due to his self-centered, pleasure loving life) and also of the poor man Lazarus, who sat at his gate, begging and receiving nothing but scorn. Although Lazarus was despised in this world, he found great glory in heaven because of his patience and humility. Interestingly, in this account, Lazarus' name was remembered but the rich man's name was forgotten entirely, not only in the Gospel but also in eternity. His forgotten name, being linked to his person, shows that the rich man failed to attain to the measure of a true person due to his failure to love his neighbor and his failure to acknowledge and find his life in God. Our own name is only remembered before God when we remember Him and others, for this is the way that we become true “persons”...when we find our life and love outside of ourselves in God and our neighbor.

We might ask ourselves then: If I am the rich man, who would be Lazarus in my life? Who am I neglecting, ignoring, and depriving of my help, my time, and my resources? Who have I passed by that was in real need and I scorned? If we all think a moment, it is certain we can all think of many such instances. However, it might not even be that Lazarus is outside the gates of our houses but rather within our own house. Our wife, or husband, our children, our parents, our community that we live with. And yet even more so, the rich man might even be our very own bodies, adorned and pampered, and Lazarus, our poor soul: hungry, ignored, and scorned.

1 H. Richard Niebuhr.

Consequently, we must always remember that the beginning of heaven and hell are here, today, found within our hearts....not in some distant place beyond the grave. Through our virtuous living: by being kind, patient, giving, loving, Christian persons, we will store up true riches within our hearts which will last forever. In contrast, if we condemn, are hateful, wrathful, hoarding our resources, if we willingly sin and fail to repent we will be united to a dark and sinful fuel which when coming into contact with the Glory of God will burn forever.

God's grace and light remain the same for all and yet how we relate to God's glory and light determines how we will spend eternity in it: in inexpressible joy or indescribable torment. For those who sought communion with Christ in this life, this glory and light will be Paradise, for Heaven is not a place but it is rather a person: it is communion with Jesus Christ our Lord through His Church which we realize through the sacraments and by keeping His commandments. For those who rejected this communion, they will be united contrary to grace (Lossky), and this unbearable light will be darkness and torment for the blinded eyes of their heart just as the sunlight is unbearable for sickly and weak eyes.

St. John Climacus tells us that it is impossible to live our life devoutly today unless we consider that it could be our last². Being mindful of our death helps us to recall that our lives and all of our actions in this world will have eternal consequences....that our good thoughts and deeds will pave a way for us into the Kingdom. The remembrance of our own inescapable death and the Judgment of God is recommended by many fathers as a way to restrain ourselves from sinning and as a cure for every evil. Just to consider the possibility that we could suffer an unchangeable eternal loss of God's love, peace, and joy is enough to bring sobriety to our mind and vigilance to our hearts.

The questions remain for us then today: Who is our Lazarus? What is in our hearts? It is only when God's light and grace shines into our hearts that we can see the truth that is in Christ and what is really there within the depths of our own hearts. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness at the creation of the world hath shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ (II Cor. 4.) And it is this light that shows us the way; it illumines the path and reveals to us the way we must go in order to find Life. If we are faithful to God to the end, in our patience, by His mercy and grace, we will possess our souls (Luke) for a never ending eternity in goodness, light, peace and joy unspeakable...for God is not as concerned with our success as He is with our faithfulness to Him. Let us all strive to follow the difficult and narrow way of Christ so that we might know the truth of the Incarnation of God in the Flesh, of His Resurrection from the dead, and of His Ascension into heaven from whence He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead: to those who have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and to those who have done evil and have not repented of it, unto the resurrection of damnation (John 5:29.) Amen.