

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Feb 25th 2016

A parable is not a picture of reality. It is an illustration using an imagined case to convey a message. But, for the parable to be credible, people must recognize real situations in the imagined one. How credible was this parable for Jesus' listeners? The parable would have been very much credible in the time of the prophet Amos. He condemns the selfish me-first concern of Zion's inhabitants, the rich and powerful ignoring the weak, while the people as a whole are facing collapse. That situation had not changed noticeably in Galilee in the time of Jesus and he told this parable, because he felt it was credible for his listeners.

Is this parable credible today in our contemporary situations locally and globally? Can we recognize real situations in the imagined one? Most certainly we can recognize it at the international level, where the poor persons and countries are starving and all too many of them confined in refugee camps, while the rich and powerful pay only as much attention to it as it serves their political or financial interest. Pope Francis has convincingly called attention to this inequality in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, but prophetic voices find it hard to penetrate the bastions of those on the affluent side of the inequality, perhaps a case of social "affluenza" (see P.S. below). Institutional global approaches continue to fail the poor, because both physically and socially they have no voice that can be listened to. So yes, Jesus' parable is credible today at the international level.

But we can also recognize the parable at the national and local level. Our country is number two in the world in social inequality. Locally we need only to go to any of the various homeless shelters to see what is actually only the tip of the iceberg. Large sectors of our population live at or below the poverty level and they are in many ways ignored, while the rich and powerful "the beautiful people" are glamorized. Jesus' parable is surely credible today at our national and local level.

So Jesus presents us with a faith critique of our reality. Both Lazarus and the rich man die, for wealth has no say there. And now, deprived of the affirmation of peers and cronies, the rich man begins to see the light. The scene is reminiscent of despotic Saddam Hussein asking for leniency at his trial. We may have thought that perhaps in his loftiness the rich man was not even aware of the presence of that poor man at his door or at his estate's gate, but he does recognize the beggar and he even knows his name: Lazarus. It was not a matter of his not being aware of the beggar's presence and needs.

Today's gospel reading challenges our attitude of me-first concern to the extent that such attitude may be present in us.

P.S. for readers outside the U.S.A. "affluenza" was the excuse presented for leniency in sentencing by a rich young man, who driving drunk had killed four people. He claimed that in his affluent environment he had not been taught to face the consequences of his actions.

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