

26th Sunday 2016

Yes, I know. I'm out of sync with the color of the liturgical season. I should be wearing green but the color of the day, is the color purple. (At least I'm keeping my vestments on this week even if they are the wrong color! And why, why am I wearing the color purple? Simply, I wanted to identify with the rich man in the gospel. I wanted to get your attention. That's what today's scripture is about. Getting attention! Amos get's people's attention by railing against them. Fire and brimstone! Jesus' has fire and brimstone but it's a lot more subtle.

First let me tell you a story.

For the past three years I had the good fortune of living with a diocesan priest from Cameroon who was doing doctoral studies at Boston College. Maurice Ashley Agbaw came from Mamfe, a very poor diocese in the English speaking part of Cameroon. He had never been to the US before he came to Boston and he was in culture shock when he first arrived. Coming from the poverty that surrounded him, he couldn't comprehend a US supermarket like the Stah Mahket (Star Market for you) with all its choices and surplus of foods. In his country meat would be a luxury that might be had a few times a year on holidays. When I first introduced him to our family Mass community and asked him to tell the families about his family, he told them about his mother, brothers and sisters, and his father with his 3 other wives and many children. Talk about culture shock! But he also opened the eyes of the children who had so many benefits in life when he would tell stories about what it was like being a child having so few material things but so rich in spiritual things like love and family.

Three years ago approaching the 26th Sunday of Ordinary time, the reading about Lazarus and the Rich man was the story of

the day. Father Maurice come to me with a story in the NY Times about how Oprah Winfrey was in a boutique in Switzerland looking at a designer crocodile purse whose price tag was \$38,000. The salesperson approached her and suggested she look at something else more suitable to her price range. I thought that the racial stereotyping was what bothered him. But he was shocked to think that a bag would cost \$38,000 and that anyone would buy it. As he said to me, “my Bishop could build a school with that kind of money. The children could have toilets. There is so much that can be done. Let those people come to Cameroon if they want to see crocodiles!

Now you may say “everything is relative”. Someone like Oprah Winfrey is a model of charity. Just look at what she has donated to the Smithsonian Museum of African American History, which opened its doors yesterday. She deserves the best for she is the best.

There is a chasm, a great divide between rich and poor. I’m always amazed at the first pages of the NY Times magazine section with its advertisements for condominiums beginning at 1.5 million for a one-bedroom. And how many Lazaruses are on the streets, begging for money for a meal? How many homeless people do we pass by on our way to work, going shopping, going to a new restaurant. It seems to me that their name is legion if not Lazarus. It may be that I’m new to NY and I’m still astonished by the number of Lazarus on the streets. I’m sure at some point I’ll become enured, hardened to the sight of these men and women but right now everything is fresh and new. Thanks be to God for the Xavier Mission and its work for the homeless.

I know the issue is overwhelming. It's easier to ignore than to confront. It's easier to pass by than find a strategy that works. It's easier to pray for an end to homelessness than it is to change the structures that contribute to it.

Everything is relative! You do what you can with what you have. But there's the rub. Everything's relative. Our Judeo-Christian tradition challenges us to be responsible for the "other" person because they are "relatives". We are related one to the other. It's why Amos rails at the rich in the first reading. (Not a happy guy!) He accuses them of self-indulgence and self-absorption. Like the rich man in the Gospel, they are ignorant of the suffering of so many in the community. The rich man does not even notice that Lazarus is at his gate. He passes him by.

(Isn't it interesting that we as Catholics have always been obsessed with issues of sexual morality, told to fear eternal damnation because of issues that have to do with physical and emotional desires and needs, and yet the most dramatic instances of eternal damnation are reserved for those who did nothing to alleviate the pain and suffering of the "least", like in this parable or that of the sheep and the goats.

Everything's relative. Yes, each of us is called to respond to our brothers and sisters in need in the ways we can. At least we need to "see" and "know" that Lazarus is some-one who as a fellow human being merits our attention.

Perhaps it will help us if we strive the way that Paul speaks of in his letter to Timothy.

But you, child of God, pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness.