

2019 26th SUNDAY

It is not a sin to be wealthy. Jesus did not condemn the rich man in today's Parable because he was rich. And we are not told whether or not he was notably wicked. What he was condemned for was his lack of compassion. The rich man was so self-absorbed that he didn't even notice Lazarus', the dying beggar, writhing in agony at his gate. The sin which brought the rich man to hell was his blindness to the plight of the beggar and to the responsibility he had as a fellow human person to tend for him.

The Parable was not original to Jesus. It was often told in Jewish synagogues and apparently had its origin in Egyptian folklore. This makes perfect sense because there are aspects in it which don't blend well with Christian theology; especially in its portrayal of God as being implacably unforgiving. There are other discrepancies, too. To be carried by angels to Abraham's bosom is not the way Jesus normally spoke of heaven. For Jesus, being in heaven meant communion with 'Abba', the Father, not communion with Abraham. Likewise it is not Christian belief that souls in torment speak to souls in glory. And it would be a mistake to take the image of hell as being like a pit of fire too literally.

But the parable does complement Jesus' description of the Last Judgement in Matthew's Gospel where the righteous are welcomed into heaven with the words: "Come, beloved ones, enter My Kingdom for when I was hungry, you fed Me; when I was sick or in prison, you visited Me." When we come face to face with God, our ability to be at home with the Lord will hinge on whether or not we have a spirit of compassion for the poor and the destitute

In the 1st Reading, the Prophet Amos points a blow-torch at those who sleep on beds made of ivory, who drink wine by the bowlful, who anoint themselves with expensive oil and bawl drunken songs at extravagant parties, all the time not giving two hoots about the poor at their gates.

The challenge for all of us is to have a heart for the poor.

At the moment here in Gisborne we are in the middle of mayoral elections. We have the power to determine the composition of our City Council who in turn determine how the wealth and the creative energy of our City will be directed.

If our Council is to have a heart for the poor of our City, it will be because this is what the people of Gisborne demand of it. Councils simply reflect the values of the people who vote them into power.

We must carefully read the manifestos of those standing for Mayor and as Councillors. Do they have eyes to see the desperate struggle some

citizens have to pay their rates, feed their children and live with dignity? Will our Council continue to sponsor affordable public transport?

Has our Council the will to continue constructing Council flats which ensure that those of our elderly who are impoverished can live with dignity?

I took notice when one of our Mayoral candidates wrote: "We need to investigate the fairness of our rates- as much of our rates come from low income families." "I will advocate especially for those who are most vulnerable in our community." Another candidate said, "If I am Mayor, Council will play an important role in addressing the social issues in our region that are created by a lack of jobs and no affordable housing. Rates affordability is a real concern to me."

As followers of Christ we want a Council which has a heart for our poor; a Council which will identify those who are most vulnerable in our city and ensure that they are given practical help.

We, the citizens of Gisborne, must identify the person who as mayor will best use the wealth of our City to benefit Lazarus languishing at our gate.

There is a real sting in the tail of the parable when God refuses to send the spirit of Lazarus to the home of the rich man's brothers to warn them of the consequences of their blindness to the plight of the poor.

St. Luke, the Gospel writer, would have been in despair over the intransigence of so many of his fellow Jews who had failed to accept Jesus as their Messiah even though Jesus' resurrection from the dead was well and truly attested by hundreds of witnesses. Luke underlines this by naming the beggar 'Lazarus'. Just as Lazarus of Bethany's resurrection from the dead by Jesus, a month or so before Jesus' crucifixion, had failed to convince the Jewish elders of Jesus' time that Jesus was the Messiah, so the resurrection of Jesus, Himself, from the dead had failed to convince the religious leaders of Luke's ages of the truth that Jesus was God.

It underlines the reality that people see and believe only what it suits them to see and believe.

How do we get people to open their eyes and to be rid of prejudices? Clearly miracles won't do it. Neither will eloquent words. Sadly people simply ignore what they do not want to acknowledge.

Pope Francis said recently: "To be a Christian and to see our brother or sister suffering, without weeping with him or her, is to be a caricature of a Christian." Our fundamental choice as a human person is to be either compassionate and sensitive or selfish and self-centred. How we choose to be is crucial for our salvation. As we have lived on Earth, so shall we live in eternity.