



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

26th Sunday Year C

The Rich Man and Lazarus – Judgement and Mercy

Readings: Amos 6: 1, 4-7, Ps 145, 1 Timothy 6: 11-16, Luke 16: 19-31

In the long weeks in which my grandmother lay dying she was utterly distracted by the fear of being lost. She knew only that she was not good enough for heaven and would therefore shortly be taking up permanent residence in the other place. (We were not Catholics – there was no third option.)

Well-meaning agnostic family members tried to summon a modicum of belief in the otherwise neglected ‘fairy tale’ of Christian belief to assure her that she was a ‘good person’ and would soon be ‘in the light’, ‘a star in the sky’ or whatever other preposterous twaddle has replaced the rigour of belief in the popular mind. My grandmother was unmoved by their efforts but greatly moved by a sense of her own sinfulness and unworthiness. The terrifying flames of the Hell of the Victorian sermons of her childhood licked around the consciousness of her soul. They had taught her judgement but not mercy.

I travelled down from my new parish and talked to her. I was the only person who agreed with her that, much as I loved her – and she had been a wonderful grandma to me – that neither she nor I were ‘worthy’. Both of us were sinners and depended utterly on the mercy of God in Christ.

We had simply to make that prayer of confession and commitment and, like the dying thief, would be snatched from the pains of death and caught up in the triumph of Christ.

She seemed doubtful of this extraordinary possibility but, a week later, my mother reported, with some embarrassment, that my grandmother had flung herself full length on the bed and wept the simple prayer, 'Lord have mercy' over and over again.

All very un-English but then salvation often is. I quietly thanked God.

Today, of course, my grandmother's fear and scrupulosity in the face of judgement would be regarded as eccentric even among those 'benighted' enough to retain some vestige of religious belief. Certainly if you go the regular Crem. services you are unlikely to hear a prayer for the soul, a plea for God's mercy or any indication that the dear departed's disinterest in God will have any eternal consequence. They are pictured, with the complicity, of a well fee'd clergyman and usually against a background of unsuitable music, as in a spiritual deckchair on the beach of a celestial Lanzarote. ALL IS WELL.

The message to the congregation is clear. Do nothing and you'll be OK. Hell, like sin, was abolished, if memory serves, round about 1963. We have reversed the imbalance of Victorian obsession and got it equally and devastatingly wrong.

Of course we want to major on the reasons for loving God. But we forget to mention that we need to be saved from sin and death. If we are not truthful about the consequences of rejecting the Lord of Life and embracing the culture of death, then we are failing to represent the truth and fatally and eternally betraying those we love (and those we don't). I say all this with a confidence

that is not born of human hubris or personal philosophical conclusion. I say it because the Gospel is clear.

The stumbling block for those who wish to downplay or eradicate Christian teaching on Hell is that the one person who refers to it most often and most terrifyingly is Jesus Himself. Today's Gospel is just one of many references to the grim reality of the consequence of a life spent in failing to honour the Word of God.

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is stark and terrible. The idolatrous and uncompassionate heart has eternity to reflect painfully on its error. As so often, Christ inextricably links faith and works, one the inevitable fruit of the other. The absence of one puts a big question mark against the reality of the other. If the Rich Man loved God, he would feed Lazarus and bind his wounds.

Today's Gospel reminds us powerfully that Heaven is our goal. Hell is real. Our mission in Christ is to save men from the one and lead them to the other. It is as urgent as our mortality. Our daily task is to pray for them all and never forget those who have gone before us and are moving through the Purification to the eternal Presence.

One of the most damaging lies of the Reformation was to divide the Christian community in Christ on earth but also between earth and heaven by substituting individualism for community.

As Catholics we believe in Judgement AND we believe in Mercy.
It's not either/or.