HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

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

The parable of Dives and Lazarus invites the preacher into many possible fields of theological enquiry. The relationship between the Old Testament and the New…. The Christian doctrine of the afterlife, the reality of Heaven and Hell.....There is a whole outing available for the social critic who wants to explore and expound various possible economic models. Whatever route you take it is traditional for preachers on this morning’s Gospel text to display their sympathy for Lazarus and cosy up to Jesus and the much vaunted ‘option for the poor’.

As someone very recently returned from Rome I have a rather different view of begging. Those who have been there will be familiar with the church doorways and steps plagued by the shiftless proclaiming their poverty. The market places where plastic pots are shoved in your ribs with whining demands for support for remarkably able-bodied young men. Even sitting out at a pavement café one’s early evening glass of Montefalco Rosso 2008 is intruded upon by relentless importuning.

I jest....but only a little because the begging in Rome is a professional operation that has gangmasters and works on a strict shift system. It also takes place within a society that has social welfare so it does not truly reflect the position of Lazarus in the Gospel. Interestingly I did not see one immigrant begging....they
were busy making and selling stuff. After a week on the streets of Rome I sympathise with the Judge Judy, the doyenne of afternoon TV, who advises those on welfare to ‘go collect cans’.

At the other end of the scale I was walking through my favourite harbour town three weeks back to see another £3 million pound waterfront conversion going on. Who, I enquired, is doing this one?

The answer was the same as the last two properties. Where does this chap get his money from? ‘Oh’, I was informed, ‘he’s the man who saved Lloyd’s Bank’ This was news to me because I was under the impression that I had saved Lloyd’s Bank because I am one of those millions of generous taxpayers who, unconsulted, filled in the black hole in the accounts. Enough.

The problem with the parable of Dives and Lazarus is that neither are particularly attractive characters and both of them are layabouts – Lazarus at the gate, Dives on his banqueting couch and private income. Neither of them put in a shift.

Dives’ tragedy is that he believes his wealth to be the ultimate protection and defence against the harsh realities of life and death. Indeed, even in death, he begins his begging career by seeking to instruct his outrageously promoted inferior, Lazarus, to come and cool him down and rehydrate him. He has been content with the unbridgeable gap between his luxury and another’s suffering in this life. He finds it quite unacceptable in the next when the roles are reversed.

Lazarus is in a different case. In order to see this we need to see the words Jesus uses very carefully. Our translation says, ‘at the gate there lay....’
The original Greek uses a much more powerful word. It says Lazarus had been put there. Two things then....First he was disabled and, from his later description, clearly infected. Then the actual word Jesus uses is that Lazarus was ‘dumped’ there like a sack of human waste. It’s the word used for putting the rubbish out. He had no power of himself to help himself and his state was an obvious challenge to the human heart and to the duty of almsgiving which is part of religious consciousness. To those who show no mercy.....no mercy will be given.

For us, in the economically sunlit uplands of the West, we have a strange relationship with this parable. Even the poorest among us live better than most generations in human history. So we resonate with Dives, the rich man and our use of resources can be spectacularly self-centred.

But we also know our stark poverty in the face of our mortality. We, as believers, look to Lazarus too. His name means, ‘God helps me’. So that is our confession. For all our wealth we have, in the end, no power of ourselves to help ourselves. God alone is my help. We are marked by the infections of sin, unattractive, wounded. We long for healing. Starving for the food of angels, we long to be invited to the eternal banquet. Paupers, we are beggars at the Gate of Mercy.

Knowing all this we cannot watch the world go by and not be part of that great operation of the Divine Mercy that is the mission and ministry of the Church with all the resources at our command.

Pope Francis has exhorted us to ‘be mercy to the world’. Only so we will rest in Christ when our time comes.

© 2013 Fowey Retreat