

## **INDIFFERENCE AND NEGLECT: 26<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY C**

'What did Jesus do when he was on earth? That's a question that is often asked. The usual answer is that he preached, taught, and healed. What is often overlooked is that, more than anything else, Jesus mixed with people. He listened to them, talked with them, and shared their lives. Often he ate and drank with them. Meals, in fact, were one of the main ways Jesus loved and served people. They still are, for Sunday by Sunday he continues to meet us in our sacred meal of bread and wine, our Eucharist.

We live in a time of 'fast foods', an age of 'take away'. Too often meals are reduced to a kind of 'bun on the run' taken in front of the TV, a kind of 'gobble and go'. We may therefore forget the truth that there is more to a meal in the best sense of the word, than mere feeding. Ideally, a meal is meant to be something sacred, a sharing not only of food but also of lives, a sharing that includes welcome, hospitality, and conversation. Ideally, a meal is a sacrament, i.e. a sign and means of God's love, a love shared among people who welcome and treat one another as brothers and sisters, and not simply as fellow humans.

The story which Jesus told about an unnamed rich man feasting lavishly every day while a poor, hungry, broken-down beggar called Lazarus lay at the rich man's door, is a sharp criticism. It's a sharp criticism of those attitudes and behaviour which not only destroy the meaning of a meal, but also deeply offend God. For our God is a God who intends that we should share with those in need all the good things that God has shared with us.

At the time of Jesus, Jewish people were taught that any land and any other possessions were not completely theirs, to do with as they pleased. They were expected to regard them as on loan from God, and so to speak to pay God rent for them, by sharing their wealth with the poor and needy persons around them. Unless we realize this, we might be tempted to go easier on the rich man than did Jesus. We might be inclined to see him as just another victim of conspicuous consumption or as a kind of harmless playboy getting his kicks from a good table.

So we must engage in a bit of 'unpacking' of the evil that Jesus saw in the rich man and the good that he saw in the poor one. The attitude of the rich man is that of the Miller of the Dee: 'I care for no one, and no one cares for me.' Although he kids himself that his wealth is a sign that he is pleasing to God, his real god is pleasure. When it comes to food especially, he is one of those who 'shop till you drop'. He lives for one thing only - to dress in the finest clothes and to dine daily on the best dishes, the choicest cocktails, and the finest wines, that money can buy. Money and pleasure are his god, his be-all and end-all.

The flip side of his selfishness and self-indulgence is his behaviour towards Lazarus. It's not that he is actively brutal and cruel to the poor man. It's not that he actually kicks the poor man away from his door. The problem is in his complete indifference to and complete neglect of Lazarus. So engrossed is the rich man in his own world of self-indulgence, that he doesn't even notice Lazarus, broken down on his doorstep. He doesn't notice that Lazarus is hungry for even a few scraps of the bread that his rich guests use to mop up their plates. In short, the rich man totally ignores the poor man at his door.

Lazarus, on the other hand, accepts the bitterness and pain of his situation, without one word of complaint against God, and without one word of resentment and hatred for the rich man. He does not let his sufferings drive him away from God, nor dim his hope that some day in some real way things are going to get better.

There's a wise saying: 'As one lives, so one dies; and as one dies, so one stays.' It's not that God sends anyone to hell. It's just that those who live loveless lives find themselves at the end without love, and without God the source of love. That's just what hell is - a selfish and loveless existence. So it is with the rich man. He who has lived totally independently and never needing to ask anyone for anything, now experiences such misery that he has to beg for help, if only a drop of water for his parched throat. And he has to beg it from Lazarus, the beggar man whom he ignored. Lazarus, on the other hand, is now enjoying the company of true and faithful believers, and the happiness promised by Jesus to those poor and needy ones who never lose their trust in God. As Jesus says: 'Happy are you poor; the kingdom of God is yours' (Lk 6:10).

Where does this powerful story leave you and me? For a start it's a story that goes to the heart of one of our deepest longings, the longing to belong. The writer, Henri Nouwen, often spoke of the value of hospitality, which he defined as making enough space for the stranger outside to come into our lives and become an insider, our friend. So the story Jesus told raises the question: To whom do we belong? Are the only people in our lives that matter to us, our friends, our family, and our other relatives?

The story Jesus told raises a somewhat connected question: 'Who is my neighbour?' Are we honestly convinced that at any time my neighbour is the person who needs me, the person at my door right here, right now? Is my neighbour, in fact, the Lazarus I would rather not notice, the Lazarus I would even like to shoo out of my life, because I find her or him a pain, a nuisance, a burden, a waste of space? Does our neighbour include those desperate asylum seekers now knocking on the door of our rich nation for deliverance from their oppression, persecution, and death-threats both back home or in detention?

This powerful story of the rich man and Lazarus raises yet another question, this one to us as a group, as a 'church': 'What kind of church community are we? Do we especially welcome among us those who are in any way poor, crippled, blind or lame? Are we good news and mercy to them? Do we give them meaning, hope, and a sense of belonging? At our shared table of the Lord, do we help them feel wanted, loved, cared for, supported and healed? Or do we perhaps just come and go, and simply ignore who, what, and where they are? Really and truly, do we?

[bgleesoncp@gmail.com](mailto:bgleesoncp@gmail.com)