

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday (C)

25<sup>th</sup> September 2022

'Dives & Lazarus: helping us think about money'

Amos 6: *Woe to those ensconced so snugly ...*

Ps 145: *The Lord raises up those who are bowed down*

1Tim 6: the duty of doing all that you have been told, with no faults or failures.

Lk 16: 19–31: Dives & Lazarus

I returned from holiday at the start of August, and the famous annual concert series, 'the Proms' was in full swing. I bought a season ticket, so I had the chance to go to classical concerts at the Royal Albert Hall night after night, if I wished. One focus this year was an emphasis on the British composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams: this year is his 150<sup>th</sup> birthday. But a piece of his which I particularly love wasn't included in this year's Proms. It's the 'Five Variants on Dives and Lazarus,' arranged from a staggeringly beautiful English folk tune, and also re-arranged by Vaughan Williams into a hymn tune. Why does the tune have that title 'Dives & Lazarus'? That's a bit unclear, but apparently the tune goes back at least to the 16<sup>th</sup> c., and a ballad was probably sung to it which re-tells today's Gospel parable, of the rich man (*dives* in Latin) and the poor man (as we heard, named Lazarus).

The Gospel parable of 'Dives' & Lazarus puts before us very starkly this juxtaposition of rich and poor. And for a second week — after last week's words on the unscrupulous steward trying to buy himself friends — St Luke addresses the problem of money, its temptations, and the complications of a surfeit of wealth. The problem — simply put, I suppose — is that wealth can falsely *insulate* us from reality. (And the reality is that *people* matter, poor and rich alike — each person on the face of this planet is individually loved by God, and of equal worth, whether they are an important international banker, high up in a skyscraper office, or a poor Yemeni farmer whose land has been pummelled by incessant war.) Wealth can insulate us from the reality of who we are in the sight of God, and can make us think that we are totally self-sufficient, able to relax in our luxury, able to control our destiny, or keep at bay all life-threatening illnesses.

That's why, I think, it's important for us to have other experiences — especially in the here & now, as students — to see how other people live, to help the

homeless, to tend the sick, to work with the handicapped, or something ... To be more in touch with reality, rather than to try and ignore the more challenging aspects of life and suffering and death.

The rich man of Jesus's parable, '*Dives*,' simply ignores the poor man at his gate. Whether or not he was conscious of ignoring him, we're not told. Whether each day he thought, 'well, I'm not concerning myself with you,' or each day he didn't even get round to thinking about the man at all, Jesus doesn't say. The rich man would probably have thought himself not such a bad man: 'Well, I don't hurt anyone.' Nevertheless, as Jesus shows, by his inaction he condemned himself: it was in what he hadn't done that he had sinned. (We confess the very same in the *I confess*, at Mass, don't we — "In what I have done and in what I have failed to do.") He had a responsibility to his neighbour, and he utterly ignored his responsibility. Such a duty to look after the poor only really comes with a faith in God. If there's no God, then I can do what I like to my fellow human being, and it is of no consequence

whatever; but since there is a God, and since He is a loving God, and since He has taught us to love, then I cannot treat my neighbour badly — or ignore him completely — without seriously damaging my relationship with God. This is the point of Jesus's placing that rich man in *hell*. He has put himself there by isolating himself from the demands of love. He chose to cut himself off from loving his neighbour, and in doing so cut himself off from God.

The rich man complains that he hasn't had enough notice. He hasn't heard what God has to say through the prophets of Jewish Scripture, and asks for a man to *rise from the dead* in order to really convince those left behind on earth. In a prophetic statement that immediately makes us think of Jesus Himself, the rich man is told, *If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead*. We do, of course, have someone risen from the dead! ... and, as Jesus's parable teaches, His resurrection which confirms God's love for the world, is a promise of new life offered to every human being, no matter what their earthly

status. In the *In Paradisum* chant sung for the deceased at the end of a funeral Mass are the words “et cum Lazaro quondam paupere, eternam habeas requiem” (“and where Lazarus is poor no longer, there may you have eternal rest.”). But would the spectacle of Jesus’s Resurrection alone have convinced Dives, or his remaining brothers, or anyone else whose heart is dead set on stepping over his poor brother at his feet?

The world often has ways of avoiding its duty to the poor — ‘clever’ answers to poverty, for example, such as ‘there are too many people in the world, so it’s not our fault if there’s poverty’: we can fall into the awful trap of blaming so-called developing countries for having too many children. (In fact some countries have such low birth-rates as to jeopardize their whole economy in a decade or two — in Japan and even in China this is already quite a problem.) The truth is, of course, that as nations we’re just not happy enough to share out our wealth, and therefore we find ourselves in a situation rather like the rich man: ignoring the poor man and hoping he’ll go away.

As students — here and now, in your years of study and thinking, reflecting and praying — I really believe you have to set down good, Christian foundations for your attitude to money and wealth, to giving and charity. And this will have to be guided by the teaching of Christ Himself. We know how many times, in parables such as today’s, he teaches caution about the consequences of relying on *wealth*, and points us again and again to the *person* (the person of Himself, God who has become our neighbour; and the people who are our neighbours around us). Obviously as students we aren’t that flush with money, but it’s the attitude to money that we need to foster, and especially as we move through our degrees and towards future employment: what will be my measure of a ‘good job’ — will it be how well I can serve my fellow human being, or will it be the size of the pay packet? Let’s allow Jesus, in this as in all things, to speak to our hearts, letting His Gospel message *seize* our hearts, and setting them on fire to live for Him, truly to serve others, especially the poor. *Jesus, Lord, let me live Your truth!*