



Catholic Charities USA; Homily at Red Rocks

September, 2004

Am 6: 1a, 4-7
Psalm 146
1 Tim 6: 11-16
Lk 16: 19-31

Every Christian should begin every day by reflecting on a simple, cornerstone fact: Unless our hearts, our actions and our lives in some way serve the poor, we are not yet really Christian.

Our first reading today is from the prophet Amos. In Hebrew, the word "Amos" means "burden-bearer." The prophet bears a burden he needs to share with each of us. Speaking to us from the wisdom of the Old Testament, Amos wants to make us aware of the responsibility we bear, the burden of love we bear, as children of the New Covenant and disciples of Jesus Christ.

He begins by saying, "Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, woe to the complacent in Zion." "Complacent" is an interesting word. It comes from two Latin words, cum placere, which mean, "to be pleased with." It usually means to be pleased with oneself. Complacency is not laziness. Many people who are active and committed even to works of charity can at the same time be complacent -- filled with themselves; pleased with the way they think and do things.

In the Old Testament, "Zion" refers to Jerusalem at its perfection: the city on the mountain that embodied the fullness of the life of the Jewish people.

We should consider this carefully because America in the 21st century may be the closest this country has ever come to "Zion." We are a wealthy nation, a powerful and privileged people. Despite the war in Iraq, most of us feel secure and at peace. To each of us today, the Lord says, "Woe to the complacent in Zion."

The Chosen People in the time of Amos were under God's judgment because, "lying upon beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on their couches, they eat lambs taken from the flock and calves from the stalls. Improvising to the music of the harp like David they devise their own accompaniment."

The people of Israel were ignoring the Psalms that God gave to David. Instead, they were inventing their own music; in effect, creating their own meaning. In the culture of our nation, we Americans now often do the same. But God's truth can't be improvised. We should strive to be part of God's music, the melodies and harmonies of His creation. Instead we try to write our own music, and because of this, we descend into confusion.

Amos says of his contemporaries, "They drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the best oil, yet they are not made ill at the collapse of Joseph, their brother." Too often, we American Catholics know the problems of the world around us -- in our country, in our local communities, in the struggles that we observe internationally -- and yet we aren't "made sick" by what we see and hear. Why? Because we've become pleased with ourselves.

Today's Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 146, teaches us two crucial lessons. The first is that the key action of the righteous heart described in this Psalm is not to do works but to keep faith. Whether it be securing justice for the oppressed or giving food to the hungry or setting captives free, all of these works flow from keeping the faith.

The second thing to note is that it is God, not men and women, who gives sight to the blind and who raises up those who are bowed down. It is the Lord who loves the just, and it is the Lord who protects strangers. If we're going to be women and men who keep faith, we need to see that all this flows from our loving relationship with the Lord. We need to remember that if we're Christians, our history and our efforts to make our world better are God's story first and our story second. We have the privilege of being actors in this story, but it's God's story and not the other way around. The unique way in which Christians do acts of charity comes from the heart of the Lord. It begins in our relationship with the Lord and flows from that relationship.

Jesus spoke in parables. What is a parable? Try to visualize a painting that many of us have seen. The artist is William Holman Hunt, and the painting is *The Light of the World*. In it, Jesus stands in the dark with a lamp in his left hand. With his right hand he knocks on a door. The door is a heavy wooden thing covered with ivy because it hasn't been opened for a very long time.

The painting comes from a passage in Scripture that says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me" (Rev 3:20). This painting helps us understand the role of parables in Jesus' preaching. It's a kind of visual parable. Parables are one of the keys Jesus uses to unlock the closed door that often blocks our hearts. Similarly, Clarence Jordan, who frequently writes on social justice, tells us that parables are a Trojan Horse. We open our door, we let them in, and then suddenly – they've got us.

This is true about today's Gospel parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. It's not simply a story about the disparity between the rich and the poor. Its meaning is much more radical than that. This passage calls us from our complacency. It is also more a story about the next life than about this one.

The Gospel begins by describing a rich man clothed in purple who ate wonderful meals, while outside his door -- another closed door -- sat a poor man who was covered with sores and hungry. The dogs were friendlier than the people on the other side of the rich man's door, because they at least licked the poor man's wounds. Animals, to heal themselves, lick their wounds. But, ultimately, Lazarus died.

The story then moves to the very different setting of eternity, where things are reversed. The poor man is now in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man is outside. The poor man has a name, Lazarus, and the rich man who once had a name is now unknown. The word "Lazarus" means one who is cared for by God.

What does this reading tell us? It warns us that if we ignore the poor, we will go to hell. Repeat that with me: If we ignore the poor, we will go to hell. In this parable, Jesus wasn't simply talking about the important need for us to work for justice and to change the world. We need to recommit ourselves to that, of course. But if we ignore the poor – I don't mean, "actively do harm" to the poor, but just simply ignore the poor -- what's going to happen to us? We will go to hell. We don't like to hear or think things like that. We don't like to be challenged at that level of our lives. But the way we live in this world will fundamentally shape our eternity and the future of our children and those we love.

We also learn in this reading what hell is about. Hell is about a great chasm. In life a thin door separated the poor man and the rich man. In the next life, a chasm divides them. From what is that chasm made? It's carved from the heartlessness of a man who refused to love his neighbor. Not caring for our neighbor is the way we dig a chasm between ourselves and God, and ourselves and our neighbors. The rich man is stuck in his selfishness. Even in his torment, he barks orders across the chasm to Abraham and the poor man. "Have that wretch bring me some water!," and "Have that poor man go to my brothers and tell them not to be like me!"

The man utterly refuses to be in relationship. The Gospel warns us that we have no excuse for this ignorance. We already have the Torah, the Old Testament, the law and the prophets, and now we also have Jesus Christ and his Gospel. That is enough, and more than enough. We've been warned.

Someone once said that the opposite of poverty is not property. Rather, the opposite of both poverty and property is community. So what we're called to do in this world to overcome poverty is not simply or even primarily to redistribute property, but to build community. That's what was lacking in the life of the rich man, both before and after his death. He was alone, self-absorbed and complacent.

If we're among the rich and comfortable who haven't cared adequately for the poor -- and compared to the rest of the world, most of us Americans are -- this Gospel parable should make us worry. And even if we're among the poor, we shouldn't stick out our chests and say, "look at those rich people, how they are condemned in today's Gospel," because the poor too are called to build community.

A commitment to building community is the only way to transform today's world. The twin pillars of Catholic social justice are a deep respect for the individual and a deep commitment to the common good.

We ask the Lord as He shares Himself with us in the Eucharist today, to give us the strength to pursue both with all our hearts.