

093007 26th Sunday in OT Poor Man Lazarus

Peace be with you. I've just returned from a trip to Arizona – and I met with the Diocese of Tucson. God willing, I may be granted faculties to become an active deacon in Payson, Arizona – another mountain town. So I ask your prayers – and I am treasuring my last weekends in this Colorado Rocky Mountain High experience!

In my mind's ear – the Lord God spoke to me and said, “Deacon Tom, if I told you that you may have but two weekend sermons left to give in this parish... what do you think you should preach about?” I thought about this and said, “Lord Jesus – you know I've never told the story of my life as a Prodigal Son... and about my coming home to You and to your Church. That could be one homily... and I've never talked much about my journey toward becoming a deacon. How wonderful and holy most of this has been...”

There was a pause – and in my mind's ear there was a deeper tone of voice. The Lord spoke again, “Thomas – I said perhaps two weekend's to preach here – and you want to speak about yourself?” (Yikes!) “You are right dear Jesus – with your permission, may I speak about the challenge in today's Gospel – and about you as Truth and the center of all things in the world.” A warm smile entered my heart. And so, here we are... and here we go.

I have here, a small section of an Arizona newspaper – it's the Church Brief's section from just days ago.

Here it states, people are invited to attend a talk about healing disease and having energy from reading the Scriptures... There is also a seminar on stress management from a religious group called the Super Wisdom Foundation... their notice says ‘Super Wisdom will teach you Seven Vital Secrets for a Rich and

Purposeful life.’ And so it happens: each generation creates a new age of what it believes to be the hidden ways and the new truth. Yet, what did we just hear proclaimed? Jesus shares His way... the way of love and compassion that we are called to follow.

The story of Lazarus and the rich man is as meaningful... as vivid and as challenging in these days as it was when Jesus spoke the parable 2,000 years ago. Would that we could spend the time to take this parable apart. Every sentence is packed with lesson and meaning. Jesus told the people then what is still true today... that which we need to hear and struggle with today: how we view and treat poor people... the little ones... the Anawim. It is about our attitude and concern for immigrants... or marginally employed people who are our neighbors, about bad paychecks from unethical employers...

And the message then and now is this: Comfortable Christians need to be confronted. In today’s Gospel, the rich man wasn’t condemned for bad things he did – he was condemned because he did nothing. He ignored the smelly beggar outside of his home. This calling of Jesus makes us uncomfortable if we hear it.

Today’s parable and the Good Samaritan story – these tell us that selfish egotism and Christianity are diametrically opposed to each other. The self-centeredness of the rich man ties into the new ways of thinking today: for example the people who come to Church just for what THEY get out of it... or those who don’t see a need to share or have involvement with others – although sharing in love is at the absolute heart of Christ’s message. A columnist in Our Sunday Visitor recently wrote about those in this new age who separate their ideas of spirituality from religion... as seen on the t-shirt with the message: ‘I don’t let religion get in the way of my relationships.’ How’s that for a dandy new message of Christian faith practice? Let me give you an example of what I’m saying.

Have you heard of Sister Briege McKenna? She is a holy, world-renowned nun with a gift of healing. She is a frequent speaker on the Eucharist and the gift of the priesthood. This nun has written a book called MIRACLES DO HAPPEN. It's the story of her own battle with debilitating illness and an instantaneous, miraculous cure given to her by Jesus. If you want Jesus to become more real... more relevant in your life, I encourage you to read this book. At any rate – Sister Briege has traveled all over the world giving talks and in a healing ministry. One day, the nun's secretary in Florida gets a call from the Oprah Winfrey show. Wouldn't you know? Oprah has read this book. And she wants to interview Sister Briege. Sister McKenna doesn't have a clue who Oprah is. But she makes arrangements to go on the show.

Word of the upcoming event gets out – and the Florida bishop calls Sister. He warns her to be careful with Oprah because he says she's a new age person... a person with society's way of looking at things. On the morning of the show, at 5AM, Sister Briege goes for adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. In her prayer, she says, "Now Jesus – this is your turn to set Oprah straight – now come on... guide me."

The TV show gets started – and Oprah has many nice things to say about Sister McKenna and about the healing work she is doing. They talk for quite a while... and then Oprah drops this in as if in passing. Oprah says: Now Sister... you travel around the world and you do all this good work ... you mention Jesus a lot. But isn't it true that it doesn't really matter what name we use... or what words we use? We're all looking towards the same power. Briege was about to let this pass... but she looked at Oprah and said, "Indeed it does matter what we call Him... His name is Jesus. And at the holy name of Jesus every knee shall bend." I heard Briege tell this story, and the entire hall full of people erupted in applause.

So much for the New Age ‘can’t we all get along – you call it what you want sort of approach to Truth.’ You know, it’s easy to love the idea of Christ if he is a figment of our imagination... if He’s not a real, historical person who established one Church... with Truth at its core.

In this new age, God isn’t a real person. For some, God is divine energy. God is a divine fire... an essence that created us to be happy and get along. Well, I offer that it’s hard to have a personal relationship with a fire.

God created each and every one of us in love and in His image, just as he created each immigrant and every poor person.

Now going back to seekers in this ‘new age.’ Let us acknowledge that there are many who are seekers of truth. Some may be sitting here today, perhaps as visitors. Some seekers are in the Methodist Church or the Baptist faith or at E-Free. We truly honor that search for Truth in seekers of other faith walks. But all of us who hear Christ’s message are called to be a part of one Truth. To do that, we are going to have to yield our lives to Christ, repent and accept His forgiveness. We will need to love and be reconciled with Him and with our brothers and sisters. Reconciled with the Lazarus who is still among us.

Jesus offered himself as a gift – a sacrifice for our sins... Christ didn’t come just to help the poor and oppressed... In fact – he has left them as His loving gift and challenge for us. Jesus didn’t come to end the military industrial complex or big corporations. He came to redeem us – to ransom us from sin... the sin that we acknowledge and repent of... and in this, to come to reconciliation with God and with our neighbor.

This Sunday’s parable teaches us how we are to love. It leaves no room for doubt. Anyone who is in need must be taken care of with profound magnanimity.

Whether you and I struggle with this and feel called to respond by tithing to the Church... praise God. Or, in part supporting the Church and with another part supporting a public service ministry or Aids victims in Africa or Latin America... praise God and let us respond with love to Jesus' words.

For those who might hear this as a pre-Vatican II type sermon – I hope you are right. I would hope it is a talk that would make the rich man squirm if he heard it. I hope it is something that early Church leaders would agree with. And if that's correct – then you have not heard anything new age today... you have heard something authentic... something challenging... something that might... God forgive me if I am in error ... might make the Lord Jesus smile at this, my second last weekend homily in this parish.