

Preferential Option for the Poor

Biblical Justice is measured by a society's treatment of the most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the alien. These most vulnerable were not on the margins but were cast out far beyond the margins into the nether regions of exclusion.



Jesus ate and drank with those on the margins; he touched those who were society's outcasts and healed them. The marginalized and the outcasts were often the center of his parables. The parable in today's Gospel reading contains one such outcast: Lazarus.

Lazarus was a poor man, covered with sores, licked by dogs and hungry. The rich man was covered in purple garments and dined sumptuously. Lazarus lay at his door, ignored by the rich man.

Wealth is not sinful; affluence, in and of itself, is a blessing. The sin is not the wealth but how the wealth was achieved, how one's wealth is used, and whether wealth is a priority and the focus of one's attention.

The sin is also the rich's insensitivity to the poor.

Alive, the rich man's insensitivity to Lazarus is palpable (did he step over Lazarus as he passed through his doorway?). But the rich man was more than insensitive; he knew Lazarus – after all, from the fires of hell he called Lazarus by name – but chose to ignore him as if he were invisible; an outcast.

Thus, the sin of prioritizing the accumulation of wealth is compounded by the sin of neglecting the poor.

This compound sin of accumulation and neglect is not unique to individuals; it can be the vice of corporations, cultures and a government of laws where things are more important than people and the rich and middle class are more important than the poor. Saint John Paul II called this "social sin." "Once we have recognized these patterns and structures that are sinful, we need to move toward action on behalf of justice and the common good."

The psalmist praises the one who works on behalf of biblical justice – "Blessed is he who ... secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry" – because they have chosen the path of the Lord:

The LORD gives sight to the blind. The LORD raises up those who were bowed down; the LORD loves the just. The LORD protects strangers. The fatherless and the widow he sustains, but the way of the wicked he thwarts.

The prophet Amos warns of what may befall those who become complacent or fallen to the temptation of luxury:

Woe to the complacent in Zion! Lying upon beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on their couches, they eat lambs taken from the flock, and calves from the stall! They drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the best oils.

In 1958, Father Ted Hesburgh wrote, "We in America will sleep uneasily on our Beautyrest mattresses if we remember that a third of humankind has gone to bed hungry."

The fact that now it is one in every eight people on Earth goes to bed hungry each night (Source: FAO, 2013) cannot lead us to complacency. That's almost 1 billion Lazaruses who need our attention as we lift our gaze to the heavens and offer a preferential option for the poor.

(Readings for the 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time)



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