

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Lk 4:18). In the synagogue, Jesus reads the scroll from prophet Isaiah at the outset of his ministry. More than any other gospel writer, Luke shows how Jesus has a preferential option for the poor.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:20, 24). We are familiar with similar verses from Matthew and his Sermon on the Mount. Luke places these words in a Sermon from Jesus on the plain. Where Matthew wanted to portray Jesus as a new Moses, Luke is addressing predominantly Gentile Christians, so it is important for him to portray Jesus on a level playing field with the downtrodden and the neglected.

Jesus tells the Parable of the Rich Fool (12:16-21) who has so much grain he must build another barn to store it in. Jesus wants a person to share with others and thus store riches in heaven, rather than to profit from prosperity and to use the proceeds selfishly. Jesus was sent to proclaim liberty to captives, to set us free from our sins. The rich will be foolish unless they use their wealth to set people free of their debts.

Jesus tells another parable to help people recognize who should be seated in a place of honor. “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Lk 14:12-14).

Jesus tells yet another parable about the Rich Man and the Poor Man, Lazarus (Lk 6:19-26). In death, the poor man is carried away by angels to heaven, while the rich man is carried to the netherworld where he becomes the beggar. In life, the rich man heard but ignored the plight of the poor man. He suffers now for the measure of compassion that he failed to show to the suffering Lazarus is now returned to him. “My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented” (25).

While the rich man fails to repent in this lifetime, Luke tells the story of Jesus and the Tax Collector (19:1-10) to show what must be done by the rich in the present. Zacchaeus understands how things need to change and he solemnly promises: “Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over” (8). Jesus came to seek and to save the lost and that mission extends to helping the rich take on the attitude of Jesus with a preferential option for the poor.

The poor in Luke’s gospel are often the ones who are first to accept Jesus’ message of salvation. Jesus invites us to accept that same message and share it with others. “Go and tell [others] what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them” (Lk 7:22).