

“Moses and the Prophets”

“And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” St. Luke 16:31.

This parable of Lazarus and the rich man is so dramatic that it is possible to pass over the last sentence without paying much attention to it. And yet this last sentence may be the point of the whole parable: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” This expression— hearing Moses and the prophets— can be taken in two senses, and I believe our Lord intended both of them.

In the first place, hearing Moses and the prophets applies to the problem of poverty. The Hebrews in the Old Testament had their own welfare system, but it differed very much from our welfare system up in Washington. Their system had a focus at the front door. It focussed on personal contact and personal responsibility. The laws in regard to poor people were not just general laws pertaining to someone else, but very personal laws. When you harvest your wheat field, you must not cut the corners. You must leave those for the poor people to harvest. When you harvest your wheat field, you can go through it once, but if you forget a sheaf of wheat and leave it out in the field, once you have left the field, that sheaf belongs to the poor. You leave the leftovers of the harvest for the gleaners. King David’s great-grandmother was a gleaner, from Moab. It was when she was out gleaning the field, picking up what the harvesters had missed, that she met Boaz, who eventually became her husband. The laws regarding the poor were on a personal, face-to-face basis. Psalm 73 states that one of the primary responsibilities of the king is to defend the poor and the widows. There was a whole social structure in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy to protect the poor, and specifically such cases as Lazarus’. In the Book of Deuteronomy it is recorded that if a poor person comes to your door and asks for something such as food and you have it, and refuse to share it, and he prays to God, it is counted to you as a sin. Charity begins at the front door. And the 21st Chapter of Proverbs, the 13th verse, states: “Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard.” It could almost be taken, couldn’t it, as a summary of Christ’s parable? Of Lazarus, who was laid every day at the rich man’s door, and who would have been very happy just to have the crumbs which fell to the floor under the table. And even the cur dogs had more compassion on him than the rich man. Our Lord is saying, If there is not even any compassion for need that is that compelling, that immediate, if we cannot hear what Moses and the prophets are saying about this situation, neither will we be persuaded by the resurrection from the dead. That was borne out when our Lord raised another Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, and the Jewish leadership said, that settles it; He’s going to be getting so many followers now, we have to get rid of Him—and Lazarus, too! “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.” A serious warning about the suffering that is in front of us, on our doorstep.

This phrase— “If they hear not Moses and the prophets”— can be taken in another way. Moses and the prophets not only talked about the suffering of those like Lazarus, they also talked about the sufferings of our Lord. If we hear not Moses and the prophets about the suffering of our Lord, we may miss the significance of His Resurrection. You remember that after the Resurrection, as the two disciples were going at night to Emmaeus, they were talking together, and they were joined by a third person, whom they did not recognize. And He asked them why they were sorrowful, and they replied, Are you the only one in Jerusalem who does not know what has happened? And they told Him about the Crucifixion. And He responded, in the last chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke: “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all

the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself.” (24:25-27) He went back to Moses, who had told of another prophet like unto himself who would come. He talked about Isaiah, who predicted the coming of the Saviour: “For unto us a Child is born; unto us a Son is given.” (9:6) And who also talks about the Saviour as the Suffering Servant: “...and He was numbered among the transgressors; and He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” (53:12b) Psalm 22 speaks of the Crucifixion: They pierced My hands and My feet; they parted My garments among them and cast lots upon My vesture. Moses and Elijah met with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration and talked with Him about what was to come. Throughout the Old Testament, Moses and the prophets not only talked about suffering such as Lazarus experienced, they also pointed to Christ’s Crucifixion. For here on the Cross was where the Battle was fought; here was where the Victory was won. As we have said many times before: the Crucifixion is itself the Victory; the Resurrection is the Vindication, the Proclamation. If you really want to celebrate Easter, begin with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, for here is where the Battle was fought! In the light of the Resurrection, we behold the Victory on Good Friday. And if we do not hear Moses and the prophets and the psalmist about the Crucifixion, how can we be persuaded by the Resurrection?

The Crucifixion has to do with suffering; the parable of Lazarus has to do with suffering. And we are called upon to take our cross upon us. As we sang in our processional hymn: “The trivial round, the common task/ Will furnish all we ought to ask;/ Room to deny ourselves—a road/ To bring us daily nearer God.” (#155) We are to take our cross, in the light of Christ’s great gift. There are so many ways in this parish that people do reach out to meet the suffering that is at their very doorstep. The contributions that you make yourselves to all sorts of causes; the contributions that you make to the Discretionary Fund for the poor. (And I try to handle it as carefully as you would handle it—the Gospel tells us to be tender-hearted, but it doesn’t say anything about being soft-headed. There are a lot of “pros” out there, you know; and I try very hard to see that this money that you so generously give gets where it is supposed to go, and where it will do the most good.) But there are many other ways that the people in this parish reach out, as in times of sadness. Ready Snodgrass [a parishioner of All Saints whose husband died recently] was saying how much the cards and notes and the meal taken to their house mean in a time of sadness. I know of some of the visits and phone calls that some of you make with one another, and how much this helps when we are lonely or distraught. And the interest that so many of you have in the young people of this parish. This is what really counts: the immediate situations that we deal with, face-to-face, within the community. Last week, in one afternoon, one of our members talked with two families moving to Pensacola, because the cities where they had lived have become so dangerous. I’m not talking about Detroit or Chicago or New York City. One of these families came from Jackson, Miss.! He says that in the same neighborhood where he grew up, he was robbed and his car was stolen, in broad daylight! Another is coming from Montgomery, would you believe! Another one of our members this past week talked to a family from Texas, who were coming to the beach, and stopped overnight at a hotel in New Orleans. During the night, their car, with everything they had in it, was stolen out of the hotel parking garage! There’s a war going on out there! And we have to stand by one another and keep in touch with one another. As C.S. Lewis says, The Church is in enemy-occupied territory, behind Satan’s lines! We need one another. We need to meet one another, where the need is greatest. And we do it in the light of Christ’s meeting with us, His offering of Himself to us in all of His strength, in all of His love, and in the Victory which He has won, which He shares, in His graciousness, with us.

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