

Homily for September 26, 2010
Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146 (v.v.); 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

Out of Sight, Out of Mind, and Out of Luck

The U.S. Census Bureau recently released its statistics on poverty in the United States in 2009. Not surprisingly the results were pretty grim: a total of 51 million people in America were living below the official poverty line—roughly one out of seven of our nation’s residents. It was even worse for children. One in five kids in the U.S. lived in poverty. Race was also a factor: the poverty rates for blacks and Hispanics were nearly three times the rate for whites. The bottom fifth of our nation’s people held less than four percent of our nation’s wealth, while the top fifth held nearly half of it.

As I considered those statistics, it was hard not to think of Abraham’s words to the suffering *dives* (rich man) in today’s gospel reading: “[B]etween us a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.” Despite the rhetoric of our some of our politicians and talk radio hosts, we live in a nation in which there are still clearly “haves” and “have nots.” A handful of our brothers and sisters live in luxury, while tens of millions of others live in need.

It was much the same in the times of Amos, Jesus and Paul. They lived in societies in which there were rich and poor people; and they were neither so ideological as to automatically condemn wealth nor so naïve as to assume that physical poverty in itself was the gateway to virtue. What they could not accept was injustice toward those who were poor, not only the exploitation of the vulnerable but also ignoring the suffering of the needy. It was a form of grinding and dispiriting low-intensity class warfare in which the Lord could not abide.

Amos, the shepherd and tree-dresser turned prophet, decried such injustice. Last Sunday we heard him condemn the greed of those who would cheat the poor of Israel out of the little they had. In today’s first reading he takes aim at another dimension of that callousness: their indifference and complacency. While enjoying their great material prosperity—eating lamb and veal, drinking wines from bowls, and anointing themselves with the best oils—they were oblivious to the moral collapse of their nation and to the needs of those who had little to eat or drink.

God's judgment of their attitude, conveyed through the voice of Amos, was harsh: "Therefore, now they shall be the first to go into exile, and their wanton revelry shall be done away with." Because they put their brothers and sisters out of sight and out of mind, they would soon be out of luck when the Assyrians swept down upon their nation.

Though the rich man in our gospel reading was able to face in Abraham a demeanor gentler than his ancestors faced in Amos, the consequences of his own indifference—dressed in finery and dining well while Lazarus lay at his door—were far more severe. His ancestors faced an earthly exile; but he faced an eternal one. Jesus meant the story as a warning to us, regardless of our station in life, to pay attention to those who are suffering.

I was in New York a couple of weeks ago. Like many of the large cities in the world I have visited, it is a study in contrasts. There are, of course, the garish lights and ostentatious ads of Times Square and the fancy shops on Fifth Avenue. But in the shadows and even in their midst there are tens of thousands of poor people.

As I walked through Midtown, I thought of all those who work as bus persons, servers, housekeepers, and laborers. Many, I imagined, were immigrants barely making enough to get by. Yet they were the people who kept "the city that never sleeps" humming along.

Other people were simply begging and living on the streets. As I was rushing home to one of our friaries after a day of meetings at an NGO near the UN I noticed a man, his head covered with a towel, holding out a plastic cup and inviting passersby to put something into it. People ignored him. I gave him some change, but as I walked away I had to chide myself: while I may have done an act of charity, I had barely broken stride to do it.

It was almost as if that man with the cup didn't exist. Perhaps neither one of us wanted to risk the trouble or pain of eye contact. Maybe we were both embarrassed. Whatever the reason, there seemed to be a huge chasm between that man and those of us who walked past him. It was the same chasm that separated the Lazarus from the rich man, first in this life and then in the next.

As I continued my walk home, I thought about that lost opportunity. How could we have closed that chasm? It may have been too great to cross or even leap; but perhaps we could have started to build...a bridge. +