

26th Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C”
September 28-29, 2019 Cathedral of Saint Paul
Readings: Amos 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

Lay hold of eternal life.

It is a common courtesy to call another by his or her name. Now, imagine being called by your name after having been ignored routinely, even perhaps for years. In today’s Gospel, we encounter a rich man who suddenly finds his fortunes reversed. The very person whom he had ignored for so long is now the very one whose name he is invoking.

“Father...send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” In an instant, Lazarus is no longer a faceless man, but an individual with a name and an identity. The rich man calls him by name, maybe for the first time ever. He who showed no mercy to the poor beggar at his door, now himself seeks mercy both from Abraham and the beggar.

Our account follows in the heels of last week’s parable about the dishonest manager, with only two brief verses separating the accounts. It further illustrates the teaching of Jesus about the prudent use of material possessions, as you will recall the mention of “eternal dwellings” from last week. These eternal dwellings remain our calling, but so often we confuse worldly wealth for the eternal dwellings of God.

In some cultures, street beggars are so common that they are hardly even noticed; they mix right into the background. It is not difficult to see how a beggar could be routinely ignored or even could go unnoticed. Beggars were never lacking in Jerusalem, in particular at the outer gates of the Temple. Both the Old and the New Testaments mention begging,¹ and the most visible sign of poverty was, then, like today, the beseeching child.² In the time of Jesus beggars were everywhere, so Jesus and the disciples often had close contact with them. But today the tables have been turned. In this account, the rich man ends up being tormented.

¹ See Deuteronomy 15:7, Ps 109:10

² See Lamentations 4:4

But is he tormented by Lazarus, or by his own realization of his past? He calls Abraham “Father” as though he has this intimate spiritual relationship. He is calling out all the stops in his vain attempt to gain sympathy. He is insisting on his kinship with Abraham, “the father of all Hebrews.”³

His callous attempt at redemption is too late. We cannot escape this realization that the clock has run out—it is too late. This is without question a sad realization and one that forces us to confront a reality in our life. Our choices in life have consequences, and Jesus is both a merciful Savior and a just judge. He will respect the freedom of our decisions, but we do not possess an infinite number of chances.

Particular judgment happens at the moment of death, neither a moment sooner, nor later. Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. Scripture repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief Dismas, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul—a destiny which can be different for some and for others.⁴

This account is so gut wrenching because on a human level we may be rooting for the rich man. Look, he is making a last effort...he is trying. How could the Lord ignore his plea? But consider it from another perspective. The solemn Word of God in Scripture is instructive on this point. Consider the Letter to the Hebrews: It says (9:27): “It is appointed to men to die once, and after that comes the judgment.” Or again in St. Paul Letter to the Corinthians, “Each one will receive his pay, according to his works” (1 Cor 3:8).

³ Josephus, *Antiquities*. 14.255 (Pergamum); 12.226 (from 1 Macc 12:20).

⁴ CCC 1021: Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—this could happen immediately or through a period of purification, which refers to the removal of the effects of our sins, whose guilt has been forgiven (purgatory), or the person’s soul could be lost forever to immediate and everlasting damnation.

Thus, the time has come to “lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called” according to today’s second reading. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ; this is our calling. But let us never deceive ourselves into thinking that we will not be held accountable. Far from scaring us, we are motivated to draw near to Him who is our Hope and our salvation. He continually invites us to His heavenly banquet. Through our lives of faith and good works, let us answer his invitation with a resounding Yes.