

The theme for our morning's meditation is, "True compassion is based on justice." Whenever we look around and see the poor we are either challenged to feel pity towards them or be motivated to give some alms in order to satisfy our conscience. We never think that caring for the poor is a part of God's idea of justice. This morning we will be looking at the Gospel of Luke where Jesus teaches his disciples about caring for the poor through a story about a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus.

In the first scene the rich man and the poor man are shown as to how they live their lives on the earth. The rich man had all the money he wanted and there was no shortage of wealth. He was dressed in purple and fine linen. The outfits that he wore were of the nobility. Purple was the colour of royalty and linen was used for the inner garments. Segments of the upper classes in Palestine had developed a lifestyle involving the ostentatious display of wealth, which was modeled ultimately upon upper class practice in Rome. A modern day comparison would be of a person who wore all the latest designer clothes and lived a lavish lifestyle. The text also tells us that he lived a life of luxury but was not bothered about the poor man Lazarus who lived outside his gates.

On the other side we are given the picture of Lazarus, a poor man who had nothing that he could call as his home. The man did not have a roof over his head and would often lie outside the gates of the rich man hoping that he would be generous enough to give him something to eat. Lazarus was also a sick man as his body was covered with sores. The sores were obviously so bad that the dogs would come and lick his sores. As far as food was concerned he longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table. The rich man could have easily sent some food for him but he failed to do so. Instead of any servant coming and providing him food it was only the dogs who come to lick his sores which were oozing with fluids.

We are now taken to the next scene where both the rich man and Lazarus had died. Lazarus was taken to be in the Abraham's side which was meant to be the place where the righteous dead go. On the other hand the rich man was in Hades where he was tormented and as he looked up he saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. Hades is the locale where the wicked people go after death and there was a great chasm separating them.

The rich man cried out to Abraham to have mercy on him and to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue for he was in great agony in these flames. Abraham replied that the rich man had received all the good things during his lifetime, while Lazarus received all the bad things. Now he was comforted here and that there was a great chasm between them and no one could crossover from one place to the other.

The rich man then comes with a second request to Abraham asking him to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them about hell fire so that they would not land up there. Abraham tells him that they have Moses and the Prophets and they should listen to them. Moses and the Prophets refers to the entire Old Testament. In other words the scriptures were available to warn them. Even though the rich man persists with his request Abraham tells him if they do not listen to scripture they would not even listen if anyone went from dead to warn them. The reference to someone rising from the dead also hints the resurrection of Jesus himself. If the Jewish people rejected what was written in the scriptures about the coming Messiah, then even if the Messiah rises from the dead they will not believe in him.

The point of the story is that there is injustice and inequality all around us. If we are to practice justice then we are to bring equality where there is inequality and justice where there is injustice. If God has blessed us with abundance then we are called to reach out to those in need. True compassion is based on justice. We are not reaching out to the poor and needy because of social work, but because it is part of God's mandate for us to practice justice just as he himself is a God of justice. Birch and Rasmussen state, "Radical love and caring justice are not optional acts of voluntary piety, they are at the very heart of what it means to be a people belonging to this God (Jesus Christ)." We need to examine ourselves both as individuals and as a corporate body whether we are caring for the poor and needy around us. May God help us share his blessings with others showing true compassion which flows out of a demand for justice.