

Sunday, October 30, 2011 Lazarus the Beggar and the Rich Man

Luke 16: 19-31

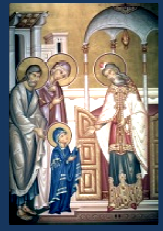
"There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day; and there was a certain beggar name Lazarus, which was laid at his gate..."

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You know, it seems we human beings constantly squabble and quarrel over material things here on earth. Nations fight over territories and rights, whether real or imagined—and some of this is done in the name of "patriotism"—; families quarrel about possessions; people bicker and are greedy and envious because they don't have what their neighbor has or what they think they *should* have or deserve. People steal in order to have things that others possess—money, belongings. So many people act as though they belong to this earth, and the things of this earth belong to them and that that is the sum total of life. It's the stuff of headlines, of novels, biographies, histories and even all kinds of sports and competitions. Winning, possessing. Mine, mine, all *mine*! I win, I get to be King of the Hill!

Of course, when you ask anyone of sound mind, even if they aren't religious, which is more important, *things* or *men*, they will always answer *men*. But the way we actually think and live, the way we deal with others—all of this shows our hypocrisy, for the fact is that we think that things, material goods, property, winning, and so forth, are more important than other human beings. This is the history of mankind, and only those who consciously and fully follow Christ are able to see well beyond these created and temporal possessions. For everyone else, this is the cause of whole lifetimes filled with quarrels, unhealthy ambition and acquisitiveness, endless sweat and anguish, and also wars.

But the holy ones of our Faith quietly and serenely ask the following questions: Where are the wealth and victories of the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs? Dust and ruins. All dust and ruins. Where are the victories and the wealth of the Caesars? All disappeared. All gone with the wind. What happened to the Empire created by Napoleon? Where is the mighty Empire of the Byzantine Emperors and the Russian Tsars? Perhaps some rare traces remain here and



there, but those things which they struggled so mightily to obtain and preserve are by and large nowhere to be found now on the earth.

I remember well when I was a high school student and was exposed to the poem, *Ozymandias*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley, written about a ruined monumental statue of a forgotten Egyptian Pharaoh:

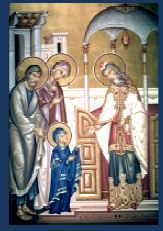
*I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said -- "two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert ... near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lips, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Brothers and sisters, over and over the Lord reminds us in Scripture, and the Holy Fathers of the Church tell us, that we do not belong to this world nor does ANYTHING IN THIS WORLD truly belong to us! At best, we are only stewards of a few necessary worldly goods. And further, most of what is in this world is--bottom line-- really not worth struggling for, not

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worth the toil and sweat and worry that goes into obtaining and keeping them, not even worth *having*, once we've got it. As a priest, and also, for a period of time a hospice chaplain, I have *never* heard one single person on their death bed tell me that they wished had worked harder at their job, amassed more money, had a larger house. Instead, what I've frequently heard is: "If only I'd spent more time with my children, my spouse; if only I'd spent more time learning about God." These are the true and authentic deathbed regrets that I've heard. So let us at least be instructed by the dying, if we will not be instructed by Christ.

You see, life is so much more simple than most of us make it.

God revealed, first to the Hebrews in the Old Testament, and then to the Jews and the New Israel of the Gentiles in the New Testament, that man belongs to God and to God only. This does not mean that we are His "possession" in the sense that you and I possess a home or an automobile. But, rather, that we, as free and rational human beings, created in the image of God and able to strive, in this life, to acquire also the likeness of God (that is, deification or theosis), have received life from the All-Eternal and completely independent and free One, who came to this world in the form of a human being like us, in order to show us how to recover—through Him--what was lost by our first parents in the Garden.

The Gospel reading appointed for today addresses all this in the rich parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. On the one hand we are given the picture of a wealthy man whose well-clothed and well-fed friends are just like him and, on the other hand, a beggar, full of sores, sickness, and hunger, longing just for a crumb of bread.

The Holy Fathers point out something very interesting here: that the Lord does not mention the name of the Rich Man, only the beggar, Lazarus. And the Fathers tell us that this is of theological significance. It means that in a certain way God does not "know" or recognize or accept the selfish Rich Man, but He fully and intimately knows and cherishes the beggar, Lazarus. In a similar way, the Lord in other situations refuses to name Herod, Pilate, or even the High Priest, Caiaphas. In fact, He says of Herod, "Go ye and tell that *fox*"—referring to



Herod as vicious animal, but not by name. On the other hand, the Lord Jesus Christ says to the righteous, "Rejoice, because your names are written in heaven"!

This should leave us with the obvious question during this morning's Liturgy: Does the Lord God *know* us? Does He know us by name? *Are our names written in heaven?!*

St. Nicolai Velimirovitch (who is, as you know by now, one of my favorite patristic commentators on Scripture), in commenting on this parable, explains that "the Rich Man's soul was as full of sores as Lazarus' body. His soul was a true image of Lazarus' [diseased] body, and Lazarus' body was a true image of [the Rich Man's] soul. God thus placed two men on earth to be a mirror, the one of the other.... The Rich Man's outward splendor mirrored Lazarus' inner state, and Lazarus' outward suppurating sores mirrored the Rich Man's inner state. Was it necessary for the Lord to enumerate all the Rich Man's sins? They were all revealed at one stroke, every single one of them. The Rich Man's lack of compassion towards Lazarus drew aside the curtain from the Rich Man's [pathetic] soul, and all the filth of this [soul]...was revealed in an instant."

When this beggar died, the angels took his soul to Paradise; and when the Rich Man died, angels—but this time, *fallen* angels, or demons—took his soul to hell. How many of this world's great, powerful, rich and famous die like the Rich Man in this parable? How many, O Lord, how many? And, on the other hand, how relatively few die like the beggar and are surrounded by angels who joyfully escort them to everlasting bliss? While the beggar lived on earth, the open sores on his body were licked by dogs; but when the Rich Man died, his body was eaten by worms. Flowers and wreaths decorated the perishable tomb of the rich man, but Lazarus was given an imperishable crown of glory. The Rich Man had a tomb of marble and stone, with nice inscriptions on it, but Lazarus' name was inscribed in the Book of Life.

There is so much more than can be said about this particularly rich and complex parable—a whole volume, in fact, could be written; many sermons. So I will focus on just one final important lesson contained in this account, and it is this: *let us believe Christ's teaching in this parable more than we believe in ourselves and our own views and opinions about everything.* The fact is that the Lord Jesus requires, no He demands this of us: that we

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believe in *Him* in order to have the eternal life of blessedness that Lazarus the beggar received.

(Again, in the words of St. Nicolai:) Thus, “we must believe Christ more readily than our own deceptive eyes and ears, and our own destructive theorizing [and reasoning]. That we may not be deluded...He, by His presence, has opened Paradise and hell to us. He has allowed the dead to inform us of what is necessary for our salvation...that we may know the real truth about the other world...that we may look on nothing in this world as our own, but on all that we have as a loan from God, for our salvation and that of those close to us!”

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.