

Beware! God will turn the tables

26th Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 29 September 2019

Readings: Am 6:1a, 4-7; 1 Tim 6:11-16; Lk 16:19-31

“The revelry of the loungers shall pass away” (Amos 6:7)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The theme that we can reflect upon today can be God’s sense of justice, which can make things turnaround. We often hear people complain: Where is God’s justice? The rich seem to prosper and the poor become poorer. Even Jesus says: “Your father in heaven makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45). Truly, Christianity doesn’t believe in any karma theory or a theory of retribution. But today’s readings seem to suggest otherwise. Let’s look at God turning the tables and meting out justice in a surprising way. Last week, we heard prophet Amos condemn the rich people of the northern kingdom, Israel, for their unjust and corrupt practices in minting money for themselves at the expense of the poor. Today, he denounces the lavish lifestyle of the leaders of Judah, and again provides a list of luxuries that are simply superfluous:
 - (a) lying on beds of ivory—their bedsteads being of very expensive ivory ornamentation;
 - (b) lounging on couches—being so wealthy they could laze around all day on couches;
 - (c) eating the meat of lambs and calves—only the tenderest, costliest would satisfy them;
 - (d) singing idle songs to the sound of the harp—having hobbies of those who didn’t work;
 - (e) drinking wine from bowls—not from glasses; thus immoderate, excessive drinking;
 - (f) anointing themselves with finest oil—applying pricey, perfumed ointments;
 - (g) finally, “not grieved over the ruin of Joseph”. Joseph, here, is not a person but rather a kingdom: the northern kingdom. Since Joseph was the ancestor of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, the members of these tribes were frequently called the ‘house of Joseph’ or just ‘Joseph’. Although these tribes(women) were their blood-brothers/sisters who were to fall prey to the Assyrians, these rich rulers were totally indifferent to their plight. Their only mantra was: Eat! Drink! Make merry! Angered, Amos prophesies: “They (rich rulers) shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away!” (6:7). This prophesy was fulfilled in the year 597 BC, when the king of Babylon attacked Jerusalem and took Jehoiachin, the king, with all his noblemen and courtesans as captives to Babylon. Indeed, God *did* turn the tables against them!
2. Last Sunday’s gospel passage—of the rich man who had a dishonest steward—ended with the punchline: “You cannot serve both, God and wealth!” (Lk 16:13). In today’s passage, Jesus pointedly addresses the Pharisees “who were lovers of money” (v.14) by narrating the fairly popular parable of the ‘*Rich Man and Lazarus*’. Here, too, like in the time of Amos, the comforts and contrasts are striking. Though the rich man in the passage is nameless—and could refer to anyone who loves money—popular and folk traditions call him ‘Dives’, which is not really a name but simply translates the Latin ‘*dives*’ meaning ‘rich’ or ‘wealthy’. By contrast, the poor man is called ‘Lazarus’, which is the Greek form of the Hebrew *El-azar*, literally meaning, “whom God helps.” Lazarus, therefore, refers to Jesus’ *least* brethren who look to God—and to you and me, too—for help and for their *roti, kapada aur makaan*: food, clothing and shelter. The rich man closely resembles the rich

rulers who Amos condemns. Like them, he was “dressed in purple and fine linen” and “feasted sumptuously *every day*.” In sharp and shocking contrast, “Lazarus, poor, and covered with sores, longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table.” More shocking, “even the dogs would come and lick his sores” (v.24). Was this detail added to show that even dumb dogs noticed him? Or, does it simply highlight the great socio-economic chasm that separates the rich ‘feaster’ from the poor one who’s forced to fast? We could focus on the ‘table’; and, like suggested in the first reading, see how things work out when God will turn the table on Lazarus and his rich neighbour.

3. With a reversal of roles in the afterlife, parallel to Lazarus’s ascent from ‘rags to riches’, we have the rich man’s descent from ‘riches to rags’. Lazarus is safe in heaven in the company of Abraham, while the rich man suffers torments and thirst in hell. Moreover, we now hear the rich man begging not for breadcrumbs but for a little drop of water. Notice that Jesus tells this parable to the *Pharisees* who believed in life after death (the Sadducees did not) and saw themselves as children of Abraham. The self-righteous Pharisees believed that prosperity was a sign of God’s blessing promised to Abraham and his posterity forever. Understandably, this parable cut the ground under their feet. Jesus forcefully reminds them that they too would land up like the rich man if they banked upon their riches and luxurious living, insensitive to the Lazaruses of their day. Unfortunately, the rich man who believed that he was Abraham’s son is condemned to inescapably remain in that hell where, Jesus specifies, “a great gulf has been fixed to stop anyone crossing from your side to ours” and vice versa. The gulf had been created not by God but by the rich man himself who kept Lazarus on the outside, the doorstep—with dogs.

Linking the 2nd Reading to the Theme: Apostle Paul, a master narrator with immense knowledge in many fields, uses imagery from the world of sport: boxing! “Fight the good fight of the faith,” says he to Timothy, adding, “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” Opening out with a list of godly virtues, in the 2nd reading Paul exhorts Timothy—who he had earlier baptized—not to throw in the towel but to persevere and to progress in his faith journey. Unlike the rich foolish man and the indulgent rulers, Timothy will realize what’s eternal, and what’s not.

The Psalm (146) on God Turning Things around has a verse: “The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down But the way of the wicked God brings to ruin”

Reflection: The rich man committed no ‘sin of *commission*’. He neither insulted the poor man nor kicked him out. His sin was that he simply *did not see* him. Do I see? Do I hear? Do I act?

In Lighter Vein: *Seated at Heaven’s ... and Hell’s Tables!*

A devotee wanted to know the difference between heaven and hell. Led by an angel to hell, he saw there a banquet laid out with sumptuous food served on a long table. However, the elbows of all those seated at table could not be bent, and so it was impossible for them to put food into their mouths. This resulted in cursing and swearing all around. Heaven was no different. There too he saw dishes laid out on a banquet table. Likewise, everybody’s elbows could not be bent. Interestingly, although heaven’s inhabitants couldn’t put food into their own mouths, they took food from the dishes and helped their neighbours to eat! Let’s stretch out our hands to feed others rather than merely filling our bellies. [End of reflection]