

Gospel text

Luke 16: 19-31

19 "There was a man who was rich, wore purple clothes and fine linen, and gave himself every day to sumptuous celebrations. 20 Behold, a beggar by the name of Lazarus was cast before his gate; he was covered with ulcers, and desired to satisfy his hunger with what was falling from the rich man's table. But it was the dogs who went to him instead to lick his wounds. 22 The beggar eventually died and was carried away by the messengers of God beside Abraham. The rich man also died and was put in a tomb. 23 While he was in Hades with great torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham and Lazarus standing beside him far off. 24 Then he cried to him, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to plunge the tip of his finger into the water and cool my tongue, for I suffer in the heart of this flame'. 25 Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you have received all the good things in your life, while during this time Lazarus received only the bad ones. However, now and here, he is comforted while you go through suffering. 26 And with all this, between you and us, an immense chasm was set up so that those who would like to go from here to you are unable to do so, just like those who would like to go from there to us'. 27 Then he responded by saying, 'I beg you, Father, send Lazarus into my father's family, 28 because I have five brothers, and I would like him to give a testimony, so that they do not find themselves also in this same place of torture'. But Abraham answers him, 'They have Moses and the prophets, they only have to listen to them'. He said again: 'No, father Abraham, but if someone of the world of the dead come to see them, at that moment they will take a new position in life'. 31 But he replies, 'If they are unable to listen to Moses and the prophets, then they will not be more convinced by someone who is raised from the dead'."

Gospel commentary - Homily

Had we known...

A first reading of the story of the rich and Lazarus causes some discomfort. Listening to the narrator of the parable, I had the feeling to hear again the frustrated and envious comment of someone who, looking at the luxury yachts crammed into Monaco's marina during the last Formula 1 Grand Prix, said, "You, the rich gang, you will die one day, and underground you will see what you and your wealth will become". Is this all that this Sunday's Gospel has to tell us?

Let's try to eliminate some misunderstandings right away. The story is divided into 2 moments: on this earth, then in the hereafter. On this earth, one contrasts a dream situation where someone has all that life can offer, and on the contrary, a poor and sick person whose situation is worse than that of dogs. Note that there is not from the rich man any word of refusal to help. In the hereafter, the situations are reversed: Lazarus shares the joys of the heavenly banquet alongside Abraham, while the rich remains underground, in the throes of torment that makes him cry for help. Therefore, between Abraham and the rich, there is a dialogue that boils down to two things: first of all, after death, the fate of each one is settled definitively according to the order proclaimed by the beatitudes, then, Scripture is enough to know the fate that awaits everyone after death.

A superficial reading of the story has several pitfalls. First trap: to imagine being in front of a description of what really awaits us after death, ie a sky where we eat with the saints, a hell where we suffer terribly, and the absence of purgatory to give the chance to some to evolve. Second trap: to imagine being in front of an exercise of retributive justice; the rich have experienced the pleasures of life, it is now the turn of the poor as if one could say: Canada has suffered so many winters, one day it will be its turn to have a climate like Florida. Third trap: to imagine that the rich are rebuked for not having been generous; never does Abraham make such a complaint.

The key of the story is given by its ending and by the whole context of the preceding chapters. Invitations to a change of life or repentance is constantly repeated, and here is a story that presents the other side of the coin, ie the world seen by God in opposition to the very human way of seeing it. How many times have the psalms ever cried how much, what men admired, was despised by God, how much what was wise for men was foolishness to God, how much God cared for the poor and the unfortunate. The change of life proposed here, or the "new position in life" as I like to translate the word "repent", is to put the glasses of God on the reality of things. These glasses allow us to see the world upside down.

It's not easy to talk about a new position in life. In our parable, the new position in life of the rich person would have allowed him to see with his new glasses the poor man he had never seen before, even though he was at his door. But one can not directly change position, like changing political party: how can one get out of a form of blindness? How could Paul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus, have realized that he was on the wrong track? According to our parable, even the miracle of returning dead can not trigger this new position in life.

To take a new position in life is like inspiration: it is a reality that works from within, without being able to command or control it. Great conversions, those that change life end to end, like Paul of Tarsus, are rare. But what we experience more often are the "small conversions", those that do not change the fundamental direction of a life, but that reveal inconsistencies in its fundamental orientation, or that reveal new horizons in relation to this orientation.

From my personal life, I have some examples. At age 7 I was a small fighter until the day when, after being beaten by a stronger one, the one I had previously nailed to the ground said to me compassionately, "Are you hurt?" My universe collapsed. At the age of 25, during a role play where everyone was trying to get rich, my mindset was suddenly shaken during a transaction when someone said to me, "Do not you think that if we work in team, it would be easier?" At age 50, I took a session with Stephen Covey to become a more effective manager and what was my discovery when I heard this saying: "You can try to do things faster, but that will only help to drive you faster in a cul de sac, as long as you do not first name the high priority of your life, and above all to make sure that this is where you're heading right now".

We can not control what may trigger a new position in life, or what the Gospel calls "repentance". It is not a matter of giving in to a false sense of guilt and starting a very high ethical program, but rather of opening up to what moans softly in the depths of one's heart, to removing obstacles which prevent it from taking off. It is fundamentally about becoming the being who is still a seed in us, and who is our true self in all its splendor. The rich man has been deceived all his life. He only discovers his true being after death, when at the heart of his ordeal he opens himself to Lazarus, or cares for his brothers. Had he known...

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, June 2001