

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

IS THE WORD ENOUGH?

Luke 16:19-31

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Analysis by Bill White

19There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' 25But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' 27He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' 29Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' 30He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses

and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

DIAGNOSIS: HE NEEDS PROOF

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Not Caring for Those in Need*

Dives has a problem. (The rich man is called Dives in the Vulgate, "dives" being the Latin word for "wealthy.") We observe that he is not charitable toward Lazarus who represents the poor, the diseased, and the lame. This is a direct violation of the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 15:4-11).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Not Believing the Scriptures*

Dives' problem is worse than not being compassionate and charitable to Lazarus. His refusal to help the poor reveals a deeper problem, namely, a faith problem. Dives has not listened to the word of Moses and the prophets, i.e. he has not believed the scriptures.

There is a question being debated here: Are "Moses and the prophets," i.e. the scriptures, effective and adequate for faith or not? Father Abraham says yes, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them" (v. 29). But Dives says no. For him listening to the sacred record of what God has done in order to generate faith in what God is doing is not enough. He needs something more substantial, more spectacular, something wide-screen in HD. "He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'" (v. 30)

Hmmmm, sounds similar to stories of people "becoming Christian" because they watched the preacher heal someone or perform some other "miracle." Or people saying they "became Christian" when

they heard their favorite sports hero or movie star give a spectacular testimony. In effect Dives is saying, "We can't just have preaching and teaching of Law and Gospel; we can't just have bible reading and bible study and expect people to come to faith! That's not enough. BUT, if we have something spectacular that just makes folks say, 'Wow! Did you see that!?!,' then people will start believing!"

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Wrong Side of the Chasm*

Worse still, Father Abraham knows the truth about folks like Dives. If their lives are so hardened by sin that they will not listen and believe the witness of the sacred scriptures, they will not believe even if someone should rise from the dead (v. 31). Dives would not listen to Moses and the prophets and hence, found himself in the place of torment separated from the place of bliss by a great chasm. Such is the fate for all who do not listen, repent, and believe.

PROGNOSIS: THE WORD IS PROOF

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *But Someone Did Rise from the Dead*

There is a chasm between the Creator and the creation, between God and us. That "chasm" is sin. And the one true God, the God of Moses and the prophets, does prove his love for us in spectacular fashion. The One who is telling this story is Jesus the Christ. He is on his way to Jerusalem where he will bridge the chasm of sin, evil and death by giving his life on the cross and rising again. As St. Paul tells us, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will

we be saved by his life (Romans 5:8-10).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *We Believe the Scriptures*

What is more, this crucified and risen Christ comes to us by the power of the Holy Spirit and enables us to listen to the Word of God, repent, and believe. Jesus bridges sin's chasm between God the Father and us. The incarnate Word of God invites and enables us to hear and believe the proclaimed Word of God and the written Word of God. Nothing more spectacular is needed. Those who listen to the sacred scriptures do believe that Someone rose from the dead. Lives that were once hardened by sin, especially the sins of greed, power, and the sense of privilege that comes with material wealth, are now transformed by Christ into lives that are compassionate and charitable to those in need.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Care for Those in Need*

Moreover, those now able to listen to the Word of God and believe the Word of God are empowered to live under the Word of God. Freed from the power of sin these transformed, Christ-connected "Diveses" now get to care for and share with the "Lazaruses" of God's creation.