

The story that comprises today's Gospel lesson begins with the statement: There was a rich man... This is the second time in this chapter that Jesus begins a story that way.

The first was the story about the dishonest manager;

a strange and wonderful story in which a master seems to condone dishonest behaviour
on the part of his manager,
and to approve of his shrewdness.

And there is a clear connection between that story and this one.

In commenting on the first story, Jesus had stated very clearly,

"You cannot serve both God and wealth."

There were Pharisees who heard that statement, and it didn't sit very well with them.

Luke tells us that the Pharisees were lovers of money,
and so they ridiculed Jesus' teaching.

There were several reasons for their ridicule.

In the first place, almost all Pharisees were rich.

You almost had to be rich to be a Pharisee;

the rituals and regulations that were so important to them took so much time to fulfill
that a person who had to earn his living simply couldn't do both!

In the second place, it was commonly accepted among the Jews
that riches were a sign of divine favour.

If you were one of the most religious people around,
and believed that riches are a clear sign that God favours you,
wouldn't you love riches?

It's important to notice that Jesus isn't reproaching the Pharisees for being wealthy;
he is charging them with serving wealth, with worshipping money.

Elsewhere he accuses them of stealing from widows and orphans!

In this situation he tells them a parable--

which means that he tells them a story that they are not going to like one little bit!

There was a rich man who lived in a magnificent mansion in the best section of Jerusalem.

His lifestyle proclaimed his wealth to the entire city

At the gate to his mansion was laid daily a beggar named Lazarus.

Lazarus would have been thrilled to receive the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table,
but he was far removed from them.

In his sick and feeble condition, Lazarus could not even keep the street dogs from licking his sores. The rich man was aware of his presence; in fact, he even knew his name.

Yet the rich man walked past him day after day, ignoring him completely.

Lazarus died, and there was no one to give him a decent burial.
But the angels carried him to be with Abraham, the father of the faithful.
The rich man died, and had a splendid funeral, attended by all the dignitaries in the city.
But he found himself in Hades, the abode of the dead, where he was in torment.
At a distance he was able to see Abraham,

and saw Lazarus enjoying the comforts and joys of Abraham's blessings.

"Father Abraham," he called, "have mercy on me!

Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue,
for I am in torment in these flames."

Everything has changed, but nothing has changed!

The rich man expects that the beggar whom he ignored during life will now serve him after death! But Abraham rejects his plea.

"No, my child, you had your good things in life, while Lazarus suffered terribly.

Now he is comforted, and you are in agony.

Besides, there is a chasm between us that no one can cross in either direction."

Rebuffed, the rich man tried another tack.

"Then, father Abraham, be so kind as to send Lazarus to warn my brothers,
so that they may not come to this place of torment."

We know that there are people who will be kind to family
although they ignore the needs of others.

Is that what is happening here?

Or is the rich man seeking an advantage for himself?

After all, if his brothers receive a warning he did not have,
can he not plead injustice and hope to improve his situation?

If that was his goal, it was vain.

Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to their testimony."

"No, father Abraham, they will not understand that any better than I did.

But if someone should return from the dead to warn them,
they will repent and change their ways."

"Ah, my child, if people will not hear God's message in the Scriptures,
they would not be convinced if someone rose from the dead to speak to them."

This parable was a devastating response to the ridicule of the Pharisees.

It used their own authority, the Hebrew Bible, to challenge their lifestyle.

Again and again the Law and the prophets spoke about the importance of caring for the poor.

The law insisted that a farmer must not cut the corners of his field,
or go back to glean the grain that had been missed,
but must leave that for the poor people.

The prophet Isaiah declares that the fast that pleases God

is one in which injustice is ended,
the oppressed are set free,
the hungry are fed,
the homeless are housed,
and the naked are clothed.

And we could go on and on.

God's will for his people is that
they shall mirror his mercy
and never allow others to be in need when they are able to help them.

That continues to be God's will for his people,
for you and for me,
because God has not changed.

The God whom we worship,
the God who came to us in Jesus Christ,
is the God of Israel.

God's love and grace are given to us in Jesus Christ,
and God's will for his people is still that his people
shall reflect God's love in all their relationships.

And an important part of God's will is that those who are in need shall be cared for,
not reluctantly but cheerfully and sacrificially,
because the poor are God's representatives on earth.

God's concern for the poor is not only for their sake, but also for ours.

God is concerned for them,
because it is God's will that the gifts he provides shall be equitably shared.

While receiving the gifts of creation is ordinarily linked to honest work,
the Scriptures recognize that many circumstances may make it impossible

for people to support themselves by work;
circumstances which range from physical and mental handicaps

to accidents
to natural disasters
to the dishonesty of others.

And so the law, the prophets, and Jesus all declare that caring for the poor is important,
for the poor need it.

But we also need it, for we need to be delivered
from making wealth a god and serving it.

Since wealth is a false god, the service of wealth becomes a terrible bondage.

In 1 Timothy, Paul tells us,

"Those who want to be rich fall into temptation
and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires
that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,

and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith
and pierced themselves with many pains."(1 Timothy 6.9,10.)

We need to be delivered from that love of money
which is really the service of a false god,
and giving to those in need is an important way on insuring
that our necessary concern for providing for our own needs
does not become a slavish longing after wealth.

So this is a very practical story.

It is not intended to give us information about life after death.

It is designed to remind us that God intends us to display his love by using our wealth
to care for the poor,
feed the hungry,
house the homeless,
clothe the naked.

And God is also concerned about the poor in spirit,
the hungry hearts,
and the rejected souls.

So what does this parable have to say to us today?

It reminds us that we belong to God, body and soul.

That means that our wallets also belong to God.

Please, take that statement seriously, our wallets belong to God!

God calls us to show our love for God and for people by giving.

Whether it be our gifts here in church,

the little dresses or pants we send to needy children overseas,

our giving to charities,

or personal giving to the needy whom God brings into our lives,

we are called by God to give,

to share what God has given us with those who are in need.

May that call from God echo in our hearts and in our lives,

today and every day.

To God, whose blessings make it possible for us to be stewards, be all praise and honour and
glory now and forever. Amen.