

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 30/07

Introduction

People who are rich or well-off often build walls around themselves. We are accustomed to the many “gated communities” in Canada and the U.S. Walled compounds are often a feature in poor countries as well. In Cuernavaca, Mexico, there is a wall on one of the major streets, strategically-placed to conceal a horrible and degrading slum. If you don’t seek it out you have no idea that people are living in such conditions in this charming city. Walls are regularly used to hide the poor and make them invisible, on the principle that out of sight means out of mind. Today’s Old Testament Reading and Gospel both talk about the ways in which the well-off tend to build walls around themselves. The prophet Amos speaks of the rich of his day, totally oblivious to what he calls “the ruin of Joseph”, that is, the suffering of the ordinary people. In the Gospel the rich man was similarly cut off from the poor man, Lazarus, picking through the garbage outside his gate.

Compared to most of the world, all of us are “well off”. So we build walls too. We build political and economic walls that keep most of the world’s poor off our doorstep and out of sight. Those walls have three main effects.

They Give Us A False View of Ourselves

The story of the rich man and Lazarus was probably addressed to the Pharisees, who tended to interpret wealth as a sign of righteousness. If you were materially well-off it was a sign, they thought, that you were leading a good life. There is a very real danger that our comfortable lifestyle will create a similar impression in us. We can come to feel that, if we are doing alright financially, it is because we are hard workers and good persons. The unexpressed part of this attitude is that, if the poor were hard workers and good persons, they would be doing alright too. That view involves a tragic confusion between what we have, a situation that results from several causes, and the kind of person we are, which is a different matter altogether.

They Make Us Blind to the Condition of the Poor

They don’t do this all the time of course. Many people respond with great generosity to the suffering they learn about through televised news reports. However this is only from time to time. The point is that for most of us the poor are not a part of our daily life. Though we perhaps would not readily admit it, we are happy to have them out of sight. Moreover, once we have made our donation to people devastated by some natural disaster, both we and the media tend to put them out of our mind.

They Make Us Defensive About Anything that Threatens Our Way of life

If we are honest, we will admit that we have a vested interest in preserving our lifestyle, and that is why we tend to react, through the ballot box, through economic pressure, and through public campaigns, to resist anything that threatens it. It is widely agreed, for example, that the rise in the number of politically conservative governments in North America and Europe, with their commitment to tax cuts and their hardline approach to refugees, reflect the political power of the middle class, who are preoccupied with preserving what they have. Since it is we who elect these governments, and ask for these political walls, it is clear that today's Gospel is calling on us to confront some very wrong attitudes in ourselves.

Conclusion

Finally there is a very scary side to today's parable and it is this. The walls we build around ourselves in life remain around us when we die. That's why in death the rich man found himself cut off from Lazarus who was with God. So too the walls we build in life can become eternal walls, and that is a very frightening thought indeed.