

## **September 29, 2013 The Rich Man and Lazarus:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in the musical play "Fiddler on the Roof," the first person to appear on stage is the show's main character Tevye, a poor Jewish dairyman and the father of five daughters. Speaking directly to the audience, Tevye says; "Every Jew knows who he is and what God expects of him". In the show's opening number, "Tradition", Tevye singles out three of the most important Jews in his small Russian village of Anatevka: the beloved rabbi, the spiritual leader of the faith community, Yenta the matchmaker, who is called upon to arrange the marriages and finally Renachim the beggar, a poor man who, on a daily basis, is looking for a hand-out.

When the character of Renachim appears on stage he is approached by one of the local merchants, who drops a kopek into his tin cup. Renachim was displeased. "But last week you gave me two kopeks", cried the beggar. Renachim, I had a bad week", replied the merchant. "But why should I suffer for your misfortune", answered the beggar. A touch of Jewish humor. Assisting the poor is a sacred obligation for the Jew. Failing to honor this command of the Lord is a serious dereliction of duty.

In the sixteenth chapter of Luke's gospel we are told that the Pharisees "loved money" (Lk. 16:14) so, it is not surprising that the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus is addressed to them as a warning. Bear in mind that the tragic figure in the parable is the rich man, and not Lazarus.

Lazarus, whose name means, "God is my help" enjoys God's favor as one who is destitute. In addition, he rests in Abraham's bosom (Lk. 16:22) after a life of deprivation and suffering. The rich man failed in his sacred duty to assist one in desperate need. He failed to acknowledge his presence at his gate. Moreover, even in death he continues to regard Lazarus as a servant by insisting that he be sent to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue (Lk. 16:24). Perhaps the words Abraham addressed to the rich man are the most chilling in the parable: "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" (Lk: 16:26).

It is true that beggars can be annoying, especially if they are dishonest about their true status. But beggars can also disturb our conscience, which is a good thing. Some years ago, the Archbishop of Chicago, Francis Cardinal George, spoke to some of the wealthiest donors in his Archdiocese. In his remarks he said: "The poor need you to bring them out of poverty and you need the poor to save you from going to hell". Ouch!

The late Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, once said that her mission in life was to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable". How do we respond to the many requests for donations, particularly in our daily mail? Do we give with a cheerful heart or begrudgingly? Have we adopted the view that the poor get what they deserve? Have we closed our eyes to human suffering? Let the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus be a healthy reminder of our solemn obligation to assist those in dire need. May the Lord afford us the grace to comply with his teachings. Amen.