

September 25, 2016 The Rich Man's Gate Homily:

Brothers and sisters, in the year 1952, the worthy recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize was an extraordinarily gifted medical missionary, Dr. Albert Schweitzer. The Nobel laureate could claim a level of expertise in fields such as medicine, theology and philosophy. In addition, he was an accomplished writer, the author of many books.

Upon completing his medical studies in 1912, he made a decision that changed the course of his long life. He chose to go to one of the poorest countries in Africa to serve the poorest of the poor as a missionary of the Gospel and a doctor whose objective was to bring the art of healing to those in need. Years later, he was asked by an inquiring journalist why he abandoned a promising medical career in his native country for a life of sacrifice in what was then called Equatorial Guinea. "I was deeply moved by Christ's parable of "the rich man and Lazarus," he replied. "For me, Europe is the 'rich man', affluent and with virtually unlimited health care. On the other hand Africa, symbolized the figure of Lazarus, dirt poor and with little, if any, access to medical care. In my view, to ignore the sufferings of an impoverished people is unacceptable."

In Christ's parable the rich man's indifference to the dire needs of the poor Lazarus condemns him. As one writer puts it, "The rich man, although he saw the beggar starving, just went on eating, drinking and reading his Wall Street Journal." Consider the following words from this justly celebrated parable. "Lying at his gate was a poor man covered with sores." (Lk.16 20)

It is interesting to note the increasing popularity of so-called "gated communities". These communities supposedly protect citizens and their property. Often staffed by private security guards, they can resemble an impregnable fortress. All undesirables are turned away. Admission is strictly enforced.

In the parable, the rich man commits a sin of omission. Even though he knows the poor man by name, he fails to pass through the gates of his estate to respond in a generous and caring way to the desperate needs of the beggar. It is clear if we use the gate to protect ourselves from those in need, the gate may become a barrier that may continue in the next life. Heaven's gate will not be open to those who shut their gates in this world.

In his best selling book, "*Jesus of Nazareth*", the erstwhile Pope, Benedict XVI, offers a profound reflection on the figure of Lazarus. He writes, "Do we not recognize in the figure of Lazarus... lying at the rich man's door covered with sores... the mystery of Jesus who 'suffered outside the city walls' and stretched naked on the cross, delivered over to the mockery and contempt of the mob, his body 'full of blows and wounds'. He, the true Lazarus, has risen from the dead and come to tell us so."

The name of Lazarus is not without significance. It means, "God helps". The only way God will help "Lazarus" is if those who claim to be followers of God heed His Holy Word and do their share to relieve the burdens of the one who is afflicted. That is why Moses and the prophets continuously hammer home the point that they hear the cries of the poor and respond accordingly.

To cite just one instance, in the Book of Deuteronomy, one reads, “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'” (Deut.15:11) In the book of the prophet Isaiah, a command is issued "Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.” (Is. 58:7)

Do we see the poor people at our own gate? Do we erect barriers so that they are never seen? Are we guilty of the sin of omission? Do we listen to the challenging words of prophets such as Amos (1st reading) and the Eternal Word, Jesus Christ?

Amen!