

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Individual income varies all around the world. In the United States, 1% of earners account for 20% of total income each year. The average income in the US is \$70,000. In Uganda, by contrast, the average person earns \$840 a year. Americans typically rank among the most generous givers worldwide, giving even to strangers, and a high percentage of us also volunteer. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence, with the task of making it fruitful and communicating its benefits to others, first of all [to the holder’s] family” (2404). So, whatever we possess comes from God; using our resources for others—that will truly satisfy.

The rich man in today’s gospel is a caricature of those who misuse the resources of Providence solely for themselves. To prepare for this parable, the lectionary provides a reading from the Prophet Amos, a dyspeptic complainer to the disappointing leaders of his day. Today he takes on the wealthy monarchs of the Northern Kingdom who betrayed the values of their patriarch Joseph. Their sin is not wealth, but complacency. Their comfy beds sport inlaid ivory. They eat lambs from their own flock, calves they have moved from the free-ranging fields into cramped stalls to get fatter. They dilly-dally with music. They drink wine from bowls reserved for sacrifice at worship. They anoint themselves with perfumes. They disregard the needs of the poor; they ignore the peril of their entire country. The kingdom of Joseph is collapsing all around them. Amos says they should therefore feel ill, but instead they are carelessly complacent. He predicts woe. Their “wanton revelry” will disappear when they become “the first to go into exile.” Even today the violence in our culture comes not from poverty: poor countries around the world do not have increased crime. Violence comes from inequality, the complacent gap between the rich and the poor.

Amos demands not only generosity, but compassion for the needs of others. Many of us give to the poor, but we may feel some disdain toward them, especially when they sit at busy intersections or set up tents on public property. That disdain may result from a false sense of security. We may think we have protected ourselves from loss, but security shatters with a change in fortunes, health, friendship or faith. When Amos declares that the monarchy will be the first to suffer exile, he warns that chastisement will come even in this life, not just in the life to come. When their safety collapses, so will their complacency. They will suffer daily the burdens of exile and of a guilty conscience.

No matter where we are on the spectrum of wealth, Amos makes us think. The resources we have ultimately come from Providence, not from our own cleverness. We are stewards who must use resources wisely for the good of our planet and all who live on it. As we enjoy our blessings, we are to remain mindful of those who have less or whose lives are in danger. We offer them compassion and leadership. The bible is filled with references about how God cares for the poor; today we hear a difficult passage warning woe to humans who do not do the same. If our conscience bothers us daily, that is already a sign that Amos’s prophecy has come true in our lives: we are being carried into an exile deprived of true joy. Directing our God-given resources toward the good of others—that will truly satisfy.

Saturday, September 24, 2022