

PROPER 21, Sept. 25, 2016, Year C

"But 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." (1 Timothy 6:9)

- At the heart of the ancient Forum, in Rome, are the remains of a large pagan temple. On its front is carved an inscription to the Emperor Antoninus Pius. The temple is preserved because it was incorporated into a Christian Church, now called San Lorenzo. The name of this church derives from a persecution of Christians by the Emperor Valerian, beginning in the year 257. Clergy and lay leaders were rounded up, their property was taken, and gatherings for worship and fellowship were banned. Though some details are disputed, in August of 258, Bishop Sixtus II and some of his deacons were discovered worshipping in the catacombs, and they were arrested. They may have been executed immediately, following the imperial edict. But they may also have been brought to the Forum, and commanded to offer pagan sacrifice at this temple. *Either way, their insistence on remaining faithful to Jesus lead to their execution. All except for one, a deacon named Laurence.*
- The Roman prefect overseeing the matter knew that Laurence was in charge of the church's money and valuables. So he promised to spare him if Laurence would surrender the church's treasures. Laurence said he would, but that he needed three days to gather them. After entrusting the money to dependable stewards, Laurence set to work assembling the poor and the sick, as well as widows and orphans. On the third day, he brought them to the temple, and presented them to the prefect. *He said, simply, "Here are the treasures of the Church!"* Feeling betrayed by Laurence's deceit, legend has it that the prefect ordered him to be executed *in a most painful way*. Laurence was supposedly chained to a gridiron, and roasted alive over hot coals. The story may be a fanciful, because there is some evidence that it rests upon a mistaken translation. But Church tradition remembers Laurence's calm and faithful endurance, as well as a cheeky comment he made to one of his executioners: *"You may turn me over now; I am done on this side."*¹
- By referring to the sick and the poor as treasures of the Church, Laurence was not being *merely* rhetorical. Throughout the Bible, we learn about God's

special love and concern for the poor. *As Jesus wanted us to see, the poor are those who are most aware of their need for God.* Not most in need of God, but most aware of their *need* for God. This is why Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."² *Those who are humble and aware of their need for God, regardless of their financial assets, are the true heirs of the kingdom.* Even if they are overlooked by the powers of this world, the poor who to us may be *nameless*, and who die in remote places, are treasures in God's own heart. This is a challenging concept, *and an even more challenging reality.* Because it's convenient to overlook the truly poor, and it's *difficult* to know how to help them.

- Laurence's legend helps us be more perceptive about our Gospel this morning.³ In Church tradition, this parable used to be called Dives and Lazarus. *But, Dives is not really a name!* It's just the Latin word for rich or wealthy. *Ironically, the rich man in Jesus' story has no identity.* But the man who in God's eyes has a name is poor Lazarus, who is both hungry and homeless, and covered with sores.
- Jesus describes the rich man, clothed with royal purple, as someone who does not see Lazarus as a fellow human being. *He is unable to see Lazarus' humanity because he has lost touch with his own.* His goal is enhancing his own personal comfort, dining sumptuously every day. He can no longer see where real fulfillment in life is to be found, in relationships with others, in community.
- Perhaps it starts with recognizing that *we are not our own.* 'Who we are' is made most meaningful when we begin to recognize whose we are. *Outwardly*, many things differentiate us from the truly poor of this world, especially from those who live in regions with *much-less-developed* economies. *But inwardly, we all have the same spiritual need for God. We must first recognize how we are united by a common condition that we all share: our spiritual poverty.* This helps those of us who are *far from poor* recognize our common humanity with those who truly *have nothing*. For God has made of one blood all the peoples of the earth.⁴ And with one blood he has also redeemed us all.

- Implicitly, we acknowledge this when we identify with Jesus. But it is impossible to identify with Jesus in a genuine way if we don't *also identify with the people with whom he identified*. The Gospels show us how *persons who were poor or rejected, sick and suffering, felt connected with him*, and it was not an accident. He spent a lot of time with such people, and caring for them. *In how he lived, Jesus showed us what being human was and is all about*. History is filled with saints who have understood this: Anthony of Egypt, Sergius of Moscow, Francis of Italy, Vincent de Paul of France. And, in our own time we have Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa.
- As always, we must remind ourselves that following Jesus does *not* require us to sacrifice our minds. Seeking to live our faith, we must embody our beliefs in social policies. This requires *serious thought*, lest we end up doing *harm* rather than *genuine good*, while trying to help others. *Our world is filled with Lazarus's*, if not literally on our doorstep, then near enough for us to see, read about, and view on television. *How, then, are we to imitate Christ and embody his love for the Lazarus's of our own day? How can we help the poor?*
- There are *easy and familiar* answers to these questions. But, *easy answers are usually not good answers*. For example, some of us may believe it is *always* the government's role to try and solve social problems, especially economic ones. Seeing things this way may get us off the hook. And some of us may believe it is *never* government's role to solve social problems. If so, then we bear special responsibility for making sure there are genuine, and effective, *non-governmental* initiatives for meeting these needs. Acknowledging that *a good answer will involve some measure of both government and private responses*, requires a wisdom that, in our current political environment, seems all too rare!
- Whatever we do, *we must always remember that those who suffer poverty, especially the homeless, are fellow human beings*. Like us, people who suffer poverty have names; they have personal histories, and families. *When we fail to recognize their humanity, we risk not recognizing our own*. This is why our participation in the Family Promise IHN and Partners in Housing programs is so

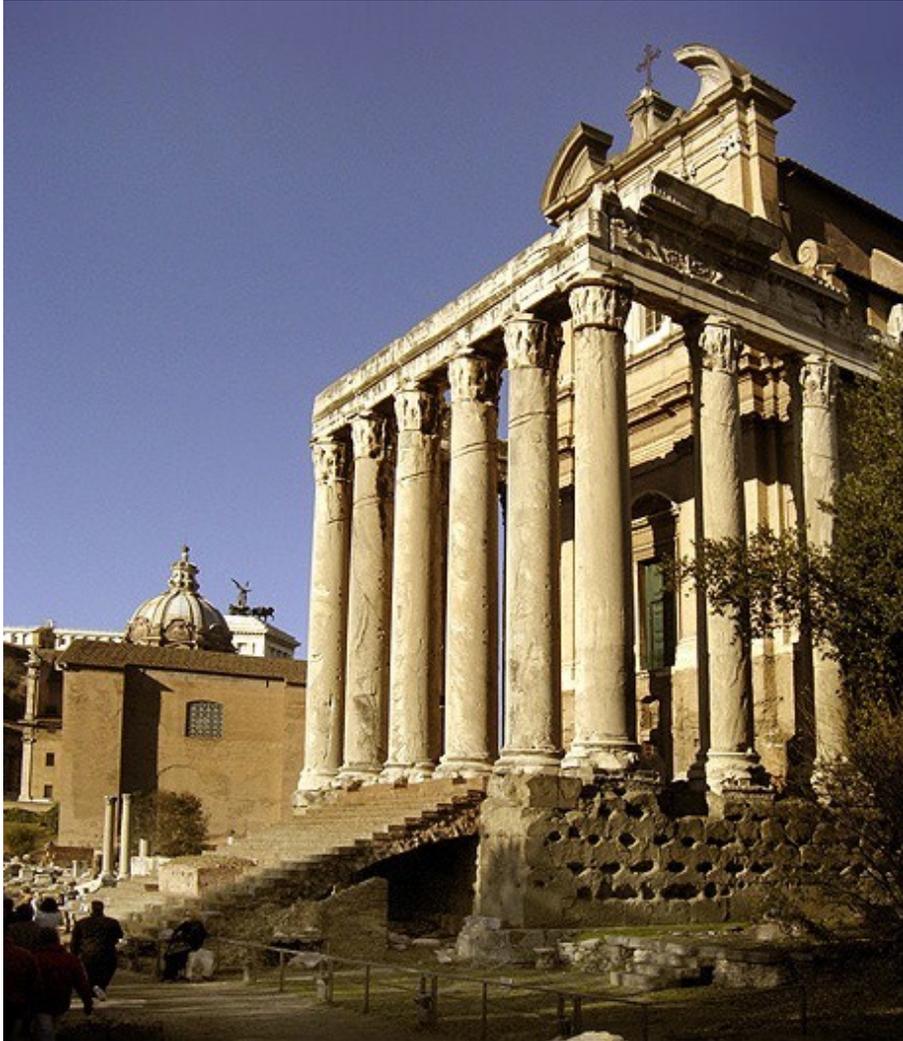
important. *We don't just send checks to help people; we provide hospitality to those who need it, and in the process we make connections with them.* This helps us grow, while it also helps *them* get ahead!

- Efforts like our work with IHN and Partners in Housing help us recover a deeper sense of our *shared* humanity. They help remind us that we have a common Lord. We have a *shared hope* in our *common future* together, around the throne of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem. When we get there, *over to the other side*, we will finally see what is *real*: we will see how things that literally separate us now, will *all* be left behind. Instead, we will see face to face the affirming One, who says to us, "*I am yours; and you are mine.*"

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, 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.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied,

'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"



Temple of Antoninus and Faustina, in the Roman Forum
Now the Church of St Lawrence

Notes

¹ The several Wikipedia articles about Laurence (or Lawrence), the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina, as well as San Lorenzo in Miranda, provide further details.

² See Matthew 5; from within his "Sermon on the Mount."

³ See Luke 16:19-31.

⁴ As the second collect for mission, in Morning Prayer, reminds us (see *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 100).