

# Sermons at Christ Church

## Arise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Pentecost XVI

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Let us see one another through eyes enlightened by understanding and compassion. Release us from judgment so we can receive the stories of our sisters and brothers with respect and attention. Open our hearts to the cries of a suffering world and the healing melodies of peace and justice for all creation. Empower us to be your instruments of justice and equality everywhere

I have heard it said that compassion is when you see dead bodies in a river and you decide to pick each one up and bury it. Justice is when you ask what caused the bodies to be in the river. Indifference is when you act as one of the three wise monkeys: See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil.

The point is, if I bring myself to see you, to acknowledge you, if you are visible to me, if I recognize your presence for whatever its worth, maybe, there will be no option but to look at you through the lens of my own sense of gratitude, vulnerability, limitations and failings. But how do I show any sense of compassion if you are invisible to me? How do I speak on your behalf or advocate for you if I do not hear your cry for help? Lazarus, the invisible man-his is the only name mentioned in all the parables of Jesus, and it simply means 'God helps.' Yes, God helps. But God's help is only made tangible when you and I refuse to be indifferent, when we make visible those who aren't.

Today's gospel story is so pregnant with symbolisms that speak of the afterlife, resurrection and punishment. Luke has Jesus talk about the invisible man in rebuke to the money-loving Pharisees. There were two men: a rich man who was clothed in purple- a clothing associated with royalty, and fine linen- the most luxurious fabric in the Middle East. He feasted sumptuously every day. He lived on a grand scale and made his living the focus of his life. The second was poor Lazarus who was hungry and emaciated. He was poorly clothed and so the sores that covered his skin was exposed. Dogs licked his sores and the dispirited Lazarus could not even frighten away the dogs that added to his misery.

Anyone who heard Jesus would have assumed that Lazarus was a sinner and that his wretched situation was a punishment from God. Conversely, the rich man who had his ease would be considered a righteous man. I am afraid to say that many of us aren't immune from falling into the trap that convinces us that the rich are blessed whereas the suffering deserve their plight. As a result we dare not lift a finger-people like Lazarus are invisible to us.

A divisive issue raging in Howard County is the redistricting of schools. This method has been effectively used in the past to bridge the education gap between Whites and African-Americans. At the core of the present conversation is the desire to make visible children who have been made invisible because of poverty and socio-economic dynamics. Present day Columbia is an idea to create an egalitarian community. But here we are, fifty years later, we have to revisit the original dream of Jim Rouse. For me, any attempt at creating equity is to make visible those who for no fault of theirs have been made invisible. I agree. We may disagree with the methodology because as good an effort as it is, it is simply a bandage. It doesn't solve the systemic issues of poverty, hunger, broken and dysfunctional homes, homelessness and the broader inequity in our society. It doesn't tackle the dearth of resources. The question shouldn't be which kid goes where, but how much we should give to a school in order to create that enabling environment for study. The cautionary tale is we shouldn't be blinded by our own circumstance to the extent that we cannot bring ourselves to recognize the presence of Lazarus-the invisible among us.

The story continues with the passing of both men. The rich man went to hell while Lazarus found a place in heaven. So, why did the rich man went to hell and Lazarus to heaven? The rich man did not do anything evil to deserve hell nor did Lazarus do anything good to be in heaven. Their different conditions in the afterlife do not suggest that the poor will go to heaven and the rich to hell.

If the rich man went to hell, then it must have been because of his total indifference towards Lazarus. The prophet Amos bemoaned the rich and prophesies that because of their indifference towards the poor, the widow, the hungry, the destitute and the orphan, because these were invisible to them, they will be the first to go into exile- they will suffer for their indifference. Neither the prophet Amos nor Jesus condemns wealth as something to be despised, rather, any indifference of the rich to the plight of the poor warrants condemnation and need not to be tolerated.

Remember the cliché “be mindful of the people you meet on your way up because it is the same people you meet on your way down.” Here's a variation “I don't care who I meet on my way up because I am not coming back down.” This variation reflects the attitude of the rich man who never thought he would ever need help from invisible Lazarus of all people.

While he was burning in hell, he saw Lazarus resting in Abraham's bosom. That was when the scales that blinded him in the past fell apart and the invisible became visible to him. Lazarus was now visible - visible to the extent that he could see him from a distance. Lazarus was now so visible that the rich man dared to call him by his name.

Recognizing the change in fortunes, he asked Abraham if he could send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue. Abraham reminded him of his former life and that of Lazarus. Furthermore, he said, the chasm between them was such that Lazarus could not cross over nor could he also cross over. The point is there is a difference between the old life and the new life, the difference is the chasm, and the chasm is such that there is no do-over.

Just as much as the gate of the rich man separated him from Lazarus, so did the chasm separate him from Lazarus? But, if there was nothing he could do, one thing he could do was to ask Abraham to send someone to warn his five brothers so they would amend their ways and avoid the same torment. For the first time, the rich man felt something similar to love: compassion for his brothers. For the first time, compassion overcame indifference. We see a man who being transformed by his new experience wishes for something different for himself and for his five brothers.

You and I are one of the five brothers on whose behalf the rich man pleads. Abraham's response reiterates the fact that we also have a choice, we can choose to listen to the prophets whose call has always been to resist the temptation to be indifferent and to show compassion. So, we too can choose to make visible those who have been rendered invisible. We can choose to be indifferent or not. We have the choice to hold up and celebrate compassion or be blinded by selfish greed, but we do not have the choice to undo in any new age what we did in the old.

As I reflect on this idea of indifference and invisibility, I remember when I graduated from high school, I later had to go back to the school for my results. The school wouldn't give me my results because I owed some tuition. I traveled to one of my father's executors for money to settle the debt. When I arrived at his home, he was sitting outside on his patio. I narrated my story to him but he paid me no mind. He stood up and went indoors and never came back out. I slept outside in the mosquito infested patio till the next morning. I never felt such humiliation in my life, and never went back to that house again. Years later I understand that his wife divorced him because of that. That may have been his hell.

As we welcome Isla into the household of God through baptism, I am reminded of a poem by Robert Frost "The Road Not Taken" a poem that reflects on the choices that life often throws at us and the fact that when we make a choice, we often do not get a chance to unmake that choice, Frost writes "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back." Since

we hardly get the chance to do it again, we should always be in the business of making visible those who are invisible.

If I cannot unmake my choices, then I cannot be indifferent nor should others be invisible to me. The only true wise monkey sees evil what it is, speaks against the evil it sees and speaks against the evil it hears because visibility is also about validation. To also be a truly wise monkey make others visible by always erring on the side of compassion. God doesn't create poverty, human beings do. What human create, humans can fix, if they so desire. Let's fix it. Amen