

Liberating Our Theology (1/2)

Dr. Justo L. González



Liberating Our Theology (1 out of 2)

In my early years I was repeatedly told that I ought to strive to know the Bible better. I still believe that is true. But in more recent times I have also become convinced that one reason why we do not know the Bible better is that we already know it too well. The old dictum, that familiarity breeds contempt, is also true of our approach to Scripture –or think we know– what it says, we do not listen carefully to it.

In recent years, however, I have been struck by the unexpected word to be found in Scripture when one is open to it. One of the ways in which I have learned to do this is to read a text looking for that verse or portion of it which is usually forgotten or ignored. This became vivid for me some years ago, in one of those elaborate ecumenical services that became so popular immediately after II Vatican Council. This was in Puerto Rico... The reading was from I Cor. 12: “For just as the body is one and has many members...” And then it struck me: the words that are read but not heard: “The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.” This body, this church, is a strange sort of body ...

As we listen to the Gospel lesson for today (obviously, by today I mean next Sunday), I invite you to listen for that part which is most often forgotten. Indeed, this text has been used for many purposes:

1. To talk about the rich and the poor. It certainly talks about that, and to this we shall return.
2. As proof of eternal damnation and salvation. And as proof that these are decided at the point of death.
3. As proof that there is recognition in the afterlife.

But today, I invite you to look with me first of all at the words that appear at the very end of the parable: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

This may be the unpleasant part of this text which we refuse to hear. It is unpleasant because it speaks of our unwillingness to hear. It tells us that we have plenty of information. Wesley saw how important this text was for Christian life, and how it undercuts our usual excuses. Allow me to read rather extensively from his sermon on this text: [READ WESLEY]

You see, what Wesley is saying is that the rich man first, and then his brothers, refuse to believe, not because they lack information, or because they need more convincing proof,

but because to believe would require an obedience they are not ready to render.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, speaks of this indissoluble connection between faith and obedience. As Protestants, we know that obedience requires faith, for without faith all that we do is of no avail. But Bonhoeffer reminds us of the importance of the seemingly contradictory proposition, that faith requires obedience. As Bonhoeffer put it, "Only one who believes is obedient, and only one who is obedient believes... Not only do those who believe obey, but only those who obey believe. In the one case faith is the condition of obedience, and in the other obedience is the condition of faith."

In other words, the great obstacle to faith is not necessarily intellectual. It is also and foremost practical, and a great deal of our contemporary intellectual doubt may be little more than an excuse not to obey what would otherwise be too clear a commandment. The rich man's brothers will not believe, not because they lack sufficient proof, but because they are not willing to obey. They have as much evidence as they need to know what they are to do. More evidence will not convince them.

The human mind has a defense mechanism which allows us to process information according to our own presuppositions and our convenience. A stark and tragic example of this: [Korean airliner]. It seems to be that this tragic incident shows the enormous dangers of a world in which we trust in radar and rockets to keep peace, and of a rhetoric of bigger

weapons and instant readiness for war. And yet, as I read the papers and watch the news, it seems that many have interpreted it as precisely proving the opposite, that we need bigger and faster rockets and more armaments. And, as I look at such reactions, I cannot but guess at the vested interests that lie behind what to me seems so irrational a response. But that is a subject for another time. The point I am trying to make is that more information will not suffice to convince people who do not wish to be convinced. Fifty airline incidents, a hundred airline incidents, will convince some that the time has come to make ready for war, and others that the time has come to speak more seriously of peace. Lazarus returning from the dead would not convince the rich man's brothers that they ought to change their ways. What they needed was not more information, more convincing proof. What they needed was more willingness to obey what they already knew from Moses and the prophets.

It is important that we recognize that this text refers to us also. If we do not believe what Moses and the prophets have to say about our condition and God's purposes of justice, we shall not believe no matter how many miracles take place. We will not believe no matter how many people return from the dead.

It is difficult for us to accept this. It is difficult because we like to think that we are in charge. We are an eminently rational civilization, and if someone could prove to us that our ways are mistaken we would change them. But the text says otherwise. The text says

that more proof will not convince those who refuse to obey the word they have. The text in fact implies that the brothers are enslaved by their riches; that they have refused to hear what Moses and the prophets have to say about such riches; and that therefore they would refuse to listen to any further proof of their erring ways. The rich brothers are not all that powerful after all. They are not in control. Their disobedience had enslaved them. They are so enslaved that even someone returning from the dead could not free them.

It is difficult for us to accept this, because we have been taught to think about ourselves as being in control. After all, this is the land of the free and the home of the brave. When it comes to issues of poverty and injustice, we are free and brave enough to do whatever is required of us. We do not even require someone to come back from the dead to tell us what we are to do. No. As soon as the committee brings in its report we shall know how to deal with world hunger, and with international injustice, and with racism, and with sexism. But we are a rational people. We require proof, information, concrete facts.

Baloney, says the text! We would not believe even if someone came back from the dead. What we lack is not more facts. What we lack is freedom. The freedom that comes from obedience. And the first thing we must do is, not to appoint a committee to get more information, but recognize our own enslavement.

It is difficult for people to recognize their own enslavement. When Jesus spoke his famous

words, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” those who heard him answered: “We are descendants of Abraham. And have never been in bondage to any one. How is it you say, ‘you will be made free’?” Odd forgetfulness of this audience, forgetting that they had indeed been in bondage in Egypt; forgetting that they were again in bondage under Rome; forgetting that they were in bondage to sin. Odd, but very understandable forgetfulness. Because to recognize one’s enslavement is the first step in a very costly and painful pilgrimage to freedom.

It is important for us to recognize our enslavement –the enslavement of which our text speaks. It is important for us to recognize that, if we do not heed Moses and the prophets, it is not because their word is not sufficiently clear, but rather because it is too clear, and we are in a situation where liberating obedience would be too costly. Otherwise we end up doing second-hand liberation theology. Oh, those poor oppressed people in Central America. We ought to do something for them. And it is true that they are poor, and that they are oppressed, and that we ought to do something about it. But it also true that they are poor and oppressed and in need because we are content in our own enslavement, and will not do what Moses and the prophets call us to do even if a thousand committees and General Conference told us otherwise.

(At this point let me open a parenthesis and make clear that I am not saying that all are equally oppressed. Nor am I inviting us to play the game of “my oppression is greater than

yours.” I am simply saying that none of us can participate in the struggle for liberation unless we begin by recognizing that we too are enslaved, and that the costly and painful pilgrimage of liberation is for us also.)

How then are we to be freed? The text gives us an indication: by obedience to the word of God. We are enslaved because we do not take even the first steps in liberating obedience. They have Moses and the prophets. Let them obey them. Then, if someone should come back from the dead, they would be able to listen. Wesley, in the sermon quoted earlier, comes to the conclusion that, since even someone returning from the dead will not convince us, “the standing revelation is the best means of rational conviction; far preferable to any of those extraordinary means which some imagine would be more effectual.” In other words, read Moses and the prophets; read the Gospels and epistles. And obey them. And in obeying you shall be free for greater obedience. And in greater obedience you will come to deeper understanding. And in deeper understanding you will be called to greater obedience.

The lectionary for this Sunday also assigns a text from the prophets. In that text we find words such as:

Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure, the notables of the first of the nations. Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves in couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the midst of the stall; who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves shall pass away.

Need we hear more? Need we a brilliant exegete to tell us what this is all about? Need we a great miracle, like Lazarus coming back from the dead? It could be no clearer, right? Wrong! A few days ago, as I was preparing for this occasion, I looked for guidance in one of the most commonly used commentaries. And I learned from that book that what Amos is speaking about here is four things: 1) Spiritual ingratitude; 2) Moral corruption (by which this author means mostly the lowering of standards of personal morality); 3) Spiritual pride; and 4) Ecclesiastical complacency. And then the commentator ends with the following inspiring words:

To be "grieved over the ruin of Joseph" is for the church to shake off its spiritual lethargy and to elect to become a laboratory in Christian living, a fellowship in which men and women exchange ideas and gather new facts with a view to experimenting further with life on a Christian basis. One likes to envision the day when every church has become a workshop in Christian living, every formal service a new attempt to worship God in sincerity and truth, every celebration of holy communion a fresh reminder of the invincible love of God...

Beautiful! Inspiring! Edifying! But not true to the text! Amos is not speaking of spiritual pride or the need for more sincere worship. Amos is speaking about real, concrete, physical wealth in an unjust society. Amos is speaking about a God who rejects our worship, no matter how sincere, no matter how proper, no matter how beautiful, no matter how inspiring, if we do not "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream." Amos is speaking of those who celebrate feasts, and drink wine by the bowlful, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, and are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph, their younger brother. Amos is speaking of those who bring near the seat of violence, of the notable ones of the first of nations, of those who are at ease, who stretch

themselves in couches. And Amos is saying to these people exactly what Lazarus would have said to the rich brothers, had he been allowed to return from the dead: “They shall be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves shall pass away.”

But we do not wish to hear Amos. And so we speak of “spiritual ingratitude, spiritual pride, and the corruption of personal morality.” Amos could not be clearer. If Lazarus came back from the dead, he could not put it in stronger words. But the rich brothers will not listen. They are enslaved by their riches. Their only hope is in obedience: obedience to Moses and the prophets; obedience in faith which will in turn open the way for further obedience and deeper faith.

So far, however, we have been considering the words of Abraham to the rich man without considering what makes them most poignant. The one telling the parable, the one showing himself to be so pessimistic about the persuasive power of even so great a miracle as a resurrection, is none other than Jesus, whose return from the dead stands at the heart of our faith. The story would have been bad enough if some great teacher had told it. But what makes it worse is that the one that speaks these words to us is none other than our risen Lord.

This has important implications for us, of which one is that we are even more inexcusable

than the rich man and his brothers. We have not only Moses and the prophets. We also have their explication in parables such as this, which make clear the meaning of Moses and the prophets, and in other teachings of Jesus. But above all we have the undeniable testimony of one who did come back from the dead. The one speaking of the judgment upon the rich and Lazarus is not some hot-headed evolutionary, some starry-eyed dreamer, or some preacher just out of seminary seeking a reputation as a prophet. The one speaking these words is the most credible witness there is—in the words Revelation, “the faithful and true witness, ...who died and came back to life.” The parable must be believed, not only because it confirms what was told by Moses and the prophets, but also and even more because it is the word of the One who has conquered even death.

But there is a second implication for us—and this is the good news. The resurrection of Jesus is not simply God’s stamp of approval on his ministry and teachings. It is also the beginning of his victory over sin, death, and every power that oppresses us. If it is true that our refusal to hear—and the brothers’ refusal to hear—is partly the result of the power evil has over us, the message of Easter is that that power has been broken. That with the help of the Risen One we can now begin to be free.

A third and final implication is that, as those who are baptized into the One who has returned from the dead, we must have a different perspective than we would otherwise have. So far, we have been taking for granted that our place in the parable is that of the

rich man or his brothers, who did have the Law and the prophets, but who would not heed them. Certainly, very few of us would fit the role of Lazarus, poor beyond description, and despised by all except the dogs that licked his wounds. But let us try another role. In a sense, we are those who have come back from the dead. Because our Lord, the Crucified, has come back from the dead, there is a sense in which we who are his have also come back from the dead. Paul put it this way: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life." Or, as he says elsewhere, "You have died, and your life is hid in Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." In other words, that in Christ's death and resurrection a new order has been established, and by being his we belong to that of the new order and see things in a different way. In the order of the world, we may have been like the rich man. But if we belong to the new order, we are no longer that. In a sense, we are those who have seen beyond the present order, and by God's grace have been given a glimpse of the coming Kingdom.

Commenting on this text, Jerome speaks of a theatre, in which people are not what they appear to be. "When you go to the theater," he says, "and see some who appear rich, you do not believe them to be really such, for they only have the appearance of being rich. Someone who acts the king or the general in the theatre may turn out to be a seller of figs

in the marketplace. The same happens when death intervenes. The show is over, and one goes on to the future life without the masks of riches or poverty. ... Unmask the rich, and you will find there a profound poverty.” The one who has Risen has illumined the world with the light of a different truth, and the falsehood of present order has been made manifest. The masks of the rich are taken off, and they are shown in all their wretchedness; the masks of first have been taken off, and they are shown to be last; the masks of the great have been taken off, and they are shown to be least.

This is who we are. A people with a new vision. A people of a new future. Our message does not end in guilt and despair –not even for the rich whose wealth makes it difficult for them to heed Moses and the prophets. Our message is the offer of a vision and a power that will allow the rich to acknowledge Lazarus as their brother, to heed Moses and the prophets, to live out of the new age that has dawned in the One who has risen from the dead. This is good news. Demanding good news. But good news nevertheless.