20th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

This parable is one of the most paradoxical. There lived a man who didn’t do anything wrong. He was rich. Is that really a bad thing? As they say, it’s better to be rich and healthy than poor and sick. And then there was Lazarus. He certainly was poor. But what was virtuous about that? Is it a virtue to be sick, starving, and generally to suffer? What’s the deal here? Why after death does the rich man suffer in hellfire, while Lazarus rests in the bosom of the Forefather Abraham? Can it really be simply because everything has to be counterbalanced and compensated, so that after a sumptuous life on earth there comes suffering, but after suffering comes joy? That’d be strange.

The parable doesn’t simply talk about two people with different fates and unequal shares in the afterlife. Lazarus lay at the rich man’s gates. Consequently, the rich man saw him every day and was well aware of what his needs were – but apparently he wasn’t in any hurry to get involved.

None of this means that the rich man was wicked and cruel. Perhaps he simply didn’t want to spoil his happy, comfortable life by coming into contact with disease, poverty, and death.

Humanly speaking, this is quite understandable. But God’s judgment is something else entirely.

And what about Lazarus? He lay there, poor, sick, festering with wounds, surrounded by dogs and, as the Gospel says, wanting to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. Who knows, maybe this happened sometimes.

Does it really please God to regard our suffering? And can suffering in and of itself really redeem sins?

No, something else is needed here. Namely, the readiness to accept God’s will without murmuring, complaints, or curses. If we patiently endure – even if not torment or suffering, but just some kind of inconvenience – with the faith that the Lord is sending us a test; and I we accept what has been sent with gratitude – then we can hope that our patience will be imputed unto us for righteousness.

Christ expects from us not abstract beauty of soul, but specific deeds that would show our faith and our love. He Himself didn’t distain joining with matter, being born in a stable, and dining with harlots. He expects the same thing of us: not closing ourselves off, not cordoning ourselves off from “other people’s problems,” but rather actively participating in the lives of those who stand in need of us.

So why did the Lord condemn the rich man? Because he had done something bad? No, because he didn’t do good.

This parable is very important for us. We Christians who go to church and regularly have Confession and Communion are, on the whole, good people: we don’t steal, we don’t kill, and we don’t get in each other’s way.

But the Lord didn’t say: “Don’t get in each other’s way.” He said: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” And our love needs to be active and effective.

So, if one fine day, we realize that the Lord is displeased with us, let’s not ask ourselves: “But what did I do?!” Let’s ask ourselves: “What have I not done, from what I could and should have done?” Let us ask, and then answer with deeds.