

Epiphany 3C
St. Luke 4:14-21
January 24th, 2016
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Rich or Poor?

"He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...' Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

I have to start out by saying that I consider myself a rich man. I have everything I want, and I want for nothing. God has blessed me with an abundance for which, most of the time I am most grateful. Working among people who are materially poor, I have come to realize the difference between my material status and real poverty quite acutely. Hence, my observation that I am a rich person, wealthy beyond the imagination of many persons I know, when I compare what I have to what little they have.

Yet wealth is often a matter of comparison, isn't it? There are those who would look at my material status and me and cast aspersions. What a small condo he has, and it is in Hartford, who would want that? They would go to great lengths to point out what I don't have and they do have. (I am reminded of this every time I get a catalog in the mail or see an ad on TV.) And then there is my 11 year old car. What about that? How can he describe himself as rich and drive that and live where he does? Indeed, what sort of delusion is Chris Rose living under?

Bring good news to the poor? The way I imagine that is having some tour bus travel to the poorest neighborhoods in the city and setting up shop, to tell the quote "poor" folks the good news of God, or some sort

of variation of that image. I imagine that God came to preach to those who are materially poor in this life and in this world. This goes along with the belief that Christianity is a religion about God blessing us with abundance, that is, with faith and prayer, God will make you rich too. And while there is a lot of truth in that statement, I do not believe the truth of God is in agreement with my fantasies about poverty and wealth.

So that leaves us, I think, with a couple of questions:

- Who are the poor?
- Who are the rich?

Let's unpack the Gospel reading. What would be good news to the poor? Would it not be to be fed, and not worry where your next meal is coming from? Would it not be to be released from anxiety and worry every day, your constant companions and best friends? Would it not be to be clothed because you lack the appropriate clothing for the season? (You know—too warm for the summer and not warm enough for the winter!) And surely wouldn't it mean to be sheltered?

Perhaps. But I think poverty and wealth as terms embrace a lot more than material things, in other words, they also apply to things spiritual. When the ghost spoke with Ebenezer Scrooge, repeating to him his phrase, "if they are going to die anyway, let them die and decrease the surplus population," when Scrooge was referring to the poor in old London. The ghost observed that Scrooge should be careful about making such a judgmental comment about the poor folk, when many of them might be more fit to live than he. This for me illustrates that poverty is not just about the lack of monetary resources: it is also about a real spiritual poverty, with which folks like Scrooge are inflicted, and this sort of poverty is more insidious and bone crushing than the monetary one. In fact, I have observed for myself in my

personal experience that some poor folks have their spiritual priorities more straight and in focus than do I.

Consider the words of Jesus in a different light from this morning's Gospel passage, when you take into account that Jesus may have been referencing spiritual poverty, and that God was bringing good news to those inflicted with this blight:

I am spiritually fed at God's table, when I have prepared myself to receive this gift, noting the caution expressed in Matthew 5:23-24: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." And again there is the cautionary statement by Paul in I Corinthians 11:27-29: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves." So I have much spiritual nourishment with which God has provided me to be fed. That is very good news! Yet the peril is great if I approach the table, ignorant of my sins and spiritual poverty.

The good news for people of faith is that their anxiety level is alleviated. My anxiety level is down, or should I say, save for my own poor choices. Consider the words of Jesus in St. Matthew 6:25-34: the so called 'Do Not Worry' passage: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that

not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Imagine the comfort of hearing God's voice speak these words to your worry filled heart and mind. Imagine the peace this good news brings to those consumed by the anxieties of this life!

I have been clothed with the clothes of spiritual protection as against the temptations this world brings to my doorstep to lead me astray and impoverish me. Consider the words of St. Paul in Romans 13:11-14:

"Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." And again Paul makes an observation about this spiritual clothing in I Thessalonians 5:8: "since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."

More good news: I have been sheltered. I am homeless no longer. I live in God's house and in God's abundant garden. Remember the words of Psalm 23: "Surely I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever."

The good news is that God does provide. I want for nothing. I have everything I need or the means to get it. This is good news to a mind

ignorant of the poverty in which it lives. This is great news of a real spiritual abundance, freely extended to me, and accessible to all.

Does this sound like good news to you? And which group do you identify with, the rich or the poor or maybe both?

God's good news is again proclaimed to the poor!

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. AMEN