

Preacher: The Ven Rosemary Lain-Priestley

Text: And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. Luke 16:8

The unexpected wisdom of surprising friends

It's really lovely to be here. I've known St James's for almost 20 years since I worked at St Martin-in-the-Fields, just down the road. The two churches share a lot of priorities and I'm very glad to be with you today.

I'm less sure that I'm glad to be preaching on today's Gospel reading. One helpful commentary told me that the parable of the dishonest manager is the most difficult of Jesus's parables to interpret because it: 'brings before us a new Jesus, one who seems inclined to compromise with evil. He approves a programme of canny self-interest ... and then appears to say to his disciples, 'Let this be your model'.

So how do we make head or tail of it?

Kenneth Bailey is a writer whose understanding of the gospels is rooted in his lived experience of Middle Eastern culture. He explains that this is one of a series of parables about the coming of the Kingdom of God. My tentative working definition of the Kingdom of God would be something like: the fullness of God's presence among us transforming the world by love and mercy, justice and grace. In some ways it's already here, but it is not always and everywhere yet. It's a work in progress. And we choose how to respond to it: to live better, deeper and fuller in response to God's love, or not.

The parable of the dishonest manager emphasises the urgency of our response to the transformational potential of God's presence in the world. The manager has not lived well and generously. He has not been trustworthy with his master's wealth and resources. He's been found out and he's being dismissed. What will he do?

Kenneth Bailey, with his knowledge of Middle Eastern customs and characteristics, explains that at the moment of crisis when the man is most

under pressure he has his greatest insight: he recognises that his master, in not sending him to jail but simply dismissing him from his role, has shown huge generosity and mercy and then he risks everything on the possibility that he might just do that a second time.

Before the news of his sacking becomes public, he calls in his master's debtors and reduces what they owe. In the context of the culture and practices of the time they will assume that the manager has persuaded the master into this generous act. They will be immensely grateful to the manager and generous towards him in return when he needs it. But they will also be so delighted by what they think is the master's generosity that they will rejoice and sing his praises, making it impossible for him, when he finds out, to reverse the decision without losing face.

This story follows on immediately from the parable of the prodigal son and the themes are the same. The son throws himself on the mercy of the father. The manager throws himself on the mercy of the master. Both experience extraordinary mercy in return. Because they know that their salvation lies in the loving parent, the gracious employer, who we recognise as God. The God who is like my friend's Mum and Dad, who used to say to her when she was a teenager 'Wherever you are and whatever you've done, we'll always pay for your taxi home'.

Bailey explains that in these and other parables Jesus is using the Rabbinic principle of story-telling which is known as 'from the light to the heavy' or the 'how much more' principle. If the human father showed such mercy to his son 'how much more' will we receive from our creator God. If the rich man showed such mercy to his manager, 'how much more' will God show mercy to us. God will always pay for our taxi home.

If we are to take seriously the depths of this love for us, then our challenge will be firstly to accept and believe that that love is for us – and we do have a hard time believing that sometimes – but also to live out that transformational love in concrete ways in our lives.

How do we work with God to bring justice, grace and generosity to our complex and multiply-challenged world community; to the Church of England, in its grappling with issues of sexuality; to this city where lovingkindness between neighbours and strangers makes all the difference to people's daily lives; our lives as colleagues, friends, partners, families – in all of these contexts the Gospel challenges us - the Kingdom challenges us - to reflect and live out the startling grace and generosity of God – how do we do it?

Well, with shrewdness, the parable suggests. It's not the manager's dishonesty or love of money which is praised: the verses about God and mammon which follow immediately on from the parable make that clear. It's his quick-witted wisdom.

And then comes that challenging line: *for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light*. Not only does this story reassure us of the depths of God's lovingkindness to us and demand of us how we might live that out, it challenges us to do it with the sort of savvy and flair that we see in the world around us. It asks us to take what is best from the insights and practices of the world around us and yet not be deflected from those core values of the Kingdom: justice, mercy, grace, generosity, truth.

The priest and theologian Tom Wright believes that in this parable Jesus is urging us 'to learn to think unconventionally, to be prepared to make new friends across traditional barriers'. So to play our part in the life and growth of the Kingdom we must sharpen our wits and use our imagination, make and broker surprising friendships, to enter mutually challenging relationships with those around us.

You have a pretty well-established tradition in this community of thinking outside the box. You also have a practice of offering space for people to explore deeply divisive issues of justice and mercy where there are no easy answers – questions of wealth, wellbeing and social justice both here and around the world, not least in the Middle East.

The theologian Paula Gooder, in an essay exploring that not-always-very-useful-question 'What would Jesus do?', says that all we can ever be sure of is that Jesus will do or say what we least expect.

As you seek to be a church which expresses the wideness of God's tent and the limitlessness of God's hospitality, as you seek the Kingdom of God in a way that is thoughtful, courageous and nuanced in a world which is often complex and confusing, remember Jesus's story of the dishonest manager! Remember that he risked everything on the grace and generosity of his master. Remember his imagination, his shrewdness, his insight in the moment of crisis. And when you find yourself among unexpected friends, resist standing in judgement, and instead, with openness and expectation, learn all that you can from them.

For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.