



Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

The parable that we have just heard has a health warning: 'Do not try this at home!'. This has to be one of the most complex and challenging to understand of all the parables. So hard, in fact, that there is almost no agreement at all about what it means or how we should interpret it. It invites more questions than it provides answers. Who brought the charges against the manager and what were they? Why did the master decide that he must dismiss the manager before hearing his account? Was the manager reducing the debts to cover up the fact that he had added his own cut and was swindling the master and the debtors? Why does the master commend him for his shrewdness? Who does the master represent in the parable? Where is God in the parable? Where am I in the Parable? Does Jesus really believe we should make friends by means of dishonest wealth? What are we to believe?

Perhaps the ambiguity is the point.

This parable seems to deal with the problems associated with an unhealthy preoccupation with wealth and status. All the people involved in this parable are wealthy. The master is clearly a person of great wealth. The manager is employed and not a slave. He doesn't wish to undertake manual work; he will not beg and he wants to remain employable after his dismissal. The debts owed to the master are thought to represent the produce of around 150 olive trees (the equivalent of 3 years wages for the average worker) and 100 acres of land (enough to produce food for 150 people for a year). The debtors themselves are wealthy- just a little less than the master.

Who is the villain in this parable? Is there one? Does there need to be?

Perhaps like many people the manager is trying to survive and make a living in an often corrupt and dishonest world in which people deceive or mislead others for their own gain, coerce or exploit other people or creation, acting out of self-interest? Perhaps, like many people, he is trying to navigate a complex and confusing moral maze with its twists and turns, where the truth is manipulated or concealed and the visible and also more hidden reality of evil is confronted? Where ethical and moral choices alter according to the price? Where people and things can be bought? Perhaps he himself is dishonest or perhaps he has no real choice but to be so?

Elsewhere, Jesus talks about being shrewd like a serpent yet gentle as the dove. Does he change? Has he learned a lesson? does he learn in the parable that friendship and good relations with his community are more important than money?

We may recognise the same challenges ourselves today. Eye watering wealth cheek by jowl with extreme poverty. Modern slavery in its many forms, the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable. The inequality in the world and in the United Kingdom. The cost-of-living crisis.

Our current political situation. The climate emergency. Expressions of our misuse of the precious resources of creation, motivated by greed and a lust for wealth, power and status.

Perhaps this parable invites us to consider to whom we belong? To whom we are accountable and responsible? From where our wealth, if we have it, comes? To consider the life and health of this planet we call home and, on the health, and well-being of our society?

We are all, in a sense, managers or tenants of the earth. Guests in a garden of paradise. Everything we have is given to us, including our bodies and the air that we breath. We are entrusted with the stewardship of creation – a gift of life from God. If we are indeed managers and tenants, what report might the master receive of us and our generation?

This challenging parable perhaps invites us to consider how we use our money and our resources, our time and our talents in building God's Kingdom. 'All things come from you O God and of your own do we give you'. We are simply invited to give back that which we have received. To share that which has been shared with us. To live more simply, so that others can simply live.

We have to recognise that we cannot build the kind of kingdom that Jesus describes in the gospels if we are motivated only by a lust for wealth, status and power. If we want to take more than we give. To give in part and not fully. Honesty and truth matter. Justice is born out of love. Earlier in this service, we prayed, 'Let us call to mind the fractured relationships and injustices of our world that separate humanity from God. Let us remember our own part in this and make our confession in penitence and faith'.

There are many parallels between the parable in our gospel today and the parable of the two sons which can be found in the preceding chapter of Luke's gospel. In the parable of the two sons, one of the sons asks for his inheritance and squanders it – the same word that is used against the manager. He loses his money, status and dignity and returns to the father in desperation. He faces the truth of his situation and decides to take action. As he approaches home the father comes running and embraces him with mercy, love and forgiveness. That which was lost is found again. The son who had died was alive. He is offered a new beginning and hope for the future.

We are reminded by scripture today that every small action of faithfulness matters, every recognition that we could live differently and every 'home coming' is an opportunity to change the world. We are to be faithful in the small things as well as the big things.

As the world continues to mourn the passing of HM the Queen, we have had the opportunity to be thankful for a life of faithful service and to reflect on the role that leaders play in bringing about change in our world. HM Queen Elizabeth said, 'It's worth remembering that it is often the small steps, not the giant leaps, that bring about the most lasting change'. As Paul writes, 'I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.'

We are invited to pray. For The King, for all the people of this land and for every person in the world. For all those in authority and for all who serve. We pray for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We pray for a better care and stewardship of the earth.

Amidst the seismic changes and the unsettling impact of the events of the last few weeks (and indeed the last few years), that perhaps leave us feeling confused and unsure for the future, (perhaps as this parable makes us feel?), we are invited to commit ourselves to pray, to return to the one who made us and the bountiful and beautiful world in which we live. To the God who causes the sun to rise out of darkness and gives life to each new day. To the God who made the oceans and everything that lives in them and for the land and sky. To the God who gives us breath and life and who delights in us as we live and grow. To the God who brings rain to water the earth and who makes creation flourish. To the unchanging God, the beginning and end, who promises to be the same yesterday, today and forever. To the God who made us and loves us, from whom we came and to whom we will return.

'All things come from you O God and of your own do we give you'.

Amen.

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