

Trinity 14 2019

Luke 16.1-13

There is a conspiracy going on..... I'm not usually a suspicious guy but when I opened the lectionary readings for today... I became convinced that the ministry team of the Osney Benefice are conspiring against me..... once again I find myself faced with an extremely difficult passage of scripture to interpret and preach upon..... I wonder do they sit there when planning rotas and think.... Ah that's one for Graham? Well I like a challenge....

The Gospel reading today is exactly that... one commentator actually heads up the section on this passage as 'The Challenge'. My heart sank because at a first reading it would appear that Jesus... the Saviour... the Messiah.... Is encouraging outrageous fraud..... 'is Jesus the master in this passage?' 'Is he suggesting we can buy our way into heaven?'

'Is Jesus encouraging sharp practice to make personal wealth?' These are all questions we need to ask of this passage.

So let's go back to the time of Jesus and look carefully at the context..... The first thing is that that the manager or master is not Jesus... he is just an example... a wealthy business person who discovers that his manager had squandered or neglect the management of the assets trusted to him... it's a common theme.... The negligent shepherds.... versus the true shepherd. This parable follows the parable of the Prodigal Son.... Wwho squandered his inheritance while his father was still alive.....

It is a time rather like our own when financial corruption is rabid..... take the tax collectors for instance.... They were cheats.... Colluding with the Romans at time when... the traders in the temple ripping off the poor.... And so forth

This is a justice story... instead of sacking the manager immediately... which he would have been entitled to do if there had been illegality

or criminal behaviour rather than negligence....
He gave the man time to prepare reports of the master's wealth presumably so that when a new manager was appointed he could start with an understanding of what he had to manage.....

Now we come to the altering of accounts....
Which to our ear is criminal.... And yet we miss a subtlety... in this narrative.... Under the Law of Moses a good Israelite could not lend money to a fellow Israelite and charge interest... so it was common practice to lend commodities... wheat... or oil And then take a percentage in addition to the return of the original amount.... It's a bit like a tax avoidance scheme..... it uses a clever interpretation of the law to do something which at first sight is not unlawful..... but which is certainly pushing the limit of the law..... the mark down in the creditors bills is simply the interest that should never have been charged in the first place....

The Master loses nothing for it was not his in the first place.... And the creditors are grateful to the manager for letting them off.... The Master can't challenge him because the evidence has been destroyed... and ironically if he had taken the manager to court he would have been exposed as someone who made his wealth by usury.....

Now if you add to this context the serious criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees.... As one who sat down with tax collectors and sinners.... Yet the wealthiest people were the Pharisees who considered their wealth to be a blessing from God even though it was gained at the expense of others.... 'Alexi Sale said that his Dad observed *'Show me a millionaire and I'll show you 999 999 people who are short of a quid'*.... That is how capitalism works.....

So Jesus is challenging the Pharisees in a very subtle way..... at the same time he is saying that if the people of God were as diligent and clever at dealing with the things of heaven....

As those who pursue wealth as an end in itself then how much richer would the kingdom be in terms of heavenly riches which cannot be monetised.....

The criticism of Jesus that he sits down with tax collectors and sinners is actually a comment of the enormous grace of God and the wonder of the Gospel.... No doubt there were sinners and tax collectors listening to this parable because they were the kind of people who became disciples....

Mammon does not mean money.... Money is neutral It's how we use money that is the real test... do we use it to make great wealth for ourselves the reciprocal of which is poverty for others... as Alexi Sale's dad points out.... Or do we use our money to build up treasure in heaven.....

If we have been good to people... generous... helpful... offering a helping hand and not grasping wealth to ourselves then the beneficiaries of that generosity will certainly be

there to welcome us in.... if we have been mean
the opposite is true.....

So this passage has nothing to do with
commending sharp practice.... It has everything
to do with the inheritance of faith... if we are
diligent... clever and generous in passing on the
faith....not trying to hold people within the
narrow constraints of our human made
traditions (this is what the Pharisees were
doing and excluding the very people Jesus was
reaching out to – Tax collectors and sinners)
Not living lives of hypocrisy but living in
integrity..... then love will prevail and the
Church will grow... Amen.....