

Sermon based on Luke 16: 1-13

The Gospel reading is at the beginning of Luke chapter 16.

It's the Parable of the Steward or land agent. This person is variously described as the Unjust or Dishonest or Unrighteous. Sometimes he is called Shrewd or Canny. This is not one of Jesus's easier parables.

Here is an employee, a trusted agent of the landowner, who appears to cheat both the local tenants and the landowner at the same time. Then he is found out and he solves the situation by appearing to commit fraud in a different way. This time the tenants get a better deal but the landowner loses income. Then, and this is very puzzling, the landowner admires him for his cleverness, for being shrewd in business.

Biblical scholars all find it puzzling. Basically, it comes under the heading of

'What on earth was Jesus on about?'

One way of finding out is to look at the story at three points in time.

Firstly at the time of Jesus, when he was actually telling this story.

Secondly at the time Luke was writing his Gospel and the Book of Acts, some time after the death and resurrection of Jesus, probably around the year 70 or 80.

Thirdly in our own time. What are the messages today?

First, let's look at it in its own time. Jesus would travel around telling this story to his followers, people of all backgrounds. In a way, this parable was not telling them anything new. He was reminding them of traditional Jewish Scriptures and Roman and Greek civic ethics. I'm sure you can think of many examples of messages about the temptations of money, about instructions not to misuse wealth, but here are just two from the Old Testament:

Deuteronomy 8:17

Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth."

Isaiah 10:3

What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth?

Jesus often told parables to shock people, to make them think. Sometimes parables were straightforward, sometimes more complicated, like this one. He wanted them to discuss the story, to argue about it, to tease out the meaning. We can't know everybody's response at the time. But we can imagine that they had various opinions. Most people at the time were tenant farmers and market traders themselves, not rich landowners. So perhaps we can imagine that they would feel most like the tenants in the parable who were happy when their rents were reduced.

Now let's look at the story a little later in time, around the year 80AD. This is when Luke wrote his Gospel about the life and teachings of Jesus. He also wrote the book of Acts about the years soon after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. We hear in Acts about the early Christians sharing their houses and possessions and looking after others. They were working out this wonderful new life of faith in Jesus.

It wasn't all nice and simple. There were indeed martyrs who were killed for their faith. There were also those who were called the 'children of light'. That's a term often used of the Essenes who lived in the desert, with strict rules about being pure and separate from others.

Most early Christians lived in narrow city streets, side by side with their Roman and Greek neighbours. They had to do business with people of different cultures and religions. They lived in the real world. They survived.

Apart from hearing or reading the Gospel of Luke and Acts, they also now knew about the letters of St Paul, including that famous quote about the love of money:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ([1 Timothy 6:9-10](#))

When these early Christians heard this parable about the Unjust Steward, they were trying not to fall into the temptations that come with the love of money. They were trying to follow what both Luke and Matthew tell us in their Gospels in almost exactly the same words:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. ([Matthew 6:24](#))

They were also expecting the end of time and the return of Christ to happen very soon. They thought it would not be long before they were welcomed into God's eternal kingdom, away from this sinful world. In the meantime, they had to keep going, to live alongside others in the real world. They had to work, trade and exist alongside people they really did not much like. We can imagine that now they may have reacted to this parable thinking that the steward was clever, shrewd, canny.

Now fast forward to life today in 2019.

We do still have crooked landlords, corrupt estate agents and loan sharks, making money out of people of low income. Here's something from a reputable and honest estate agent, explaining how fraud happens. It sounds so close to Jesus's parable that I wonder if the writer knew their Bible extremely well!

A tenant goes into an estate agent's and finds a property to let. She pays a month's rent up front and lodges a 6 week deposit against breakages or damage. The agent or landlord then uses this money to fund her business then the business goes bust and the tenant becomes another creditor of that business and loses her deposit and the landlord potentially loses their rent payment. Legally, who loses out, the tenant or landlord?

Imagine you had a job at that estate agent's and you saw that fraud happening? What would you do? Of course we have many more safeguards today than the tenants of Jesus's time had. We expect estate agents to follow professional standards. They can be struck off registers and lose their jobs if they break the law. But we all know how slowly some legal processes may work. And some politicians and business moguls do seem to get away with making billions by avoiding tax or raiding the pension funds of their workers.

On top of the problem of this confusing parable, the Unjust Steward is very like the Prodigal Son in one of Jesus's other parables. Have you noticed that neither the Prodigal Son nor the Steward actually say "Sorry" to those who suffer because of them. They DO feel sorry for themselves. But they DO NOT, apparently, say sorry about the people they have harmed or let down. That's hard to understand.

Maybe for some people that is just how they are. Perhaps that's the first step in realising what they have done. Perhaps both the Prodigal Son and the Steward did

go on later to say 'Sorry' about the other people they had harmed, directly and indirectly. We will never know.

To sum up, we have to assume that Jesus is NOT saying to us today 'Be exactly like the Steward in every way'. Perhaps he WAS saying 'One day the world will be perfect. In the meantime...'

From Monday to Saturday it's our challenge to get out of church:

'God's mission is not primarily about getting people more involved in what churches are doing, but getting churches more involved in what God is doing in the world'. (Theology of Work)

Getting churches involved in what God is doing in the world is what some of us here already do. Think of Foodbank, Debt Counselling, supporting the homeless, supporting people on very low incomes in this village, this country and in other countries. Think of what more we could do. We certainly do need the Sunday church experience. We come here on a Sunday to be sustained by a community of faith. Then from Monday to Saturday we can go on to make a difference in the world. We need to live in the real world, to get alongside people who we may not like very much. In the words of the Message version of the Bible: *'live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior'*.

We have to assume that Jesus is saying to us today

'Work out how to live with integrity in the real world'.

Here is a short thought for the day. It's in the pew sheet.

Take note of what goes on around you, but do not be compromised by it. Look beyond the tangled webs of society's dealings to the community of faith that sustains you, and be guided by the One who is just¹.

And finally, when you get to heaven, don't be shocked that God has welcomed the Dishonest Steward in before you.

Amen.

¹<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/103-september-october-2019-c/proper-20/send-out>

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