

Sermon for Sunday 18 September 2022 – Trinity 14

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Amos 8.4-7; 1 Timothy 2.1-7; Luke 16.1-13

Lord, may you turn our minds to your word, in Jesus' name. Amen. Please do be seated.

Well, Luke 16. A passage that the commentators and theologians are for once united, because they agree that it is possibly the most difficult parable to understand and interpret. It might have been easier for me to take the New Testament reading, given the circumstances we are in at the moment - I urge supplication, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and all in high positions. But I resisted that temptation. One commentator lists 17 possible approaches to this parable.

You will be pleased to know I don't intend to go through each one in detail. Maybe you wouldn't be pleased, maybe you'd like to. But what I think we'll do this morning, if you don't mind, is we'll have a bit of a scamper through just for the next few minutes without pretence that we'll settle the debate about which of the 17 approaches is correct, but hoping that something will land with each others which may be different for each of us.

So, if we read the section before, Jesus has just told three parables about lost and found. We've had the parable of the lost coin, the lost sheep and the prodigal son. And then we get a chapter break. Oh dear; because the parable of the dishonest, or the shrewd, or the prudent manager follows on immediately from the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal son is addressed to the Pharisees. The parable of the dishonest manager, with the Pharisees still in earshot, is to the disciples.

The Greek text says 'de kai', says Jesus 'and also' said to the disciples - there is a really strong connection between the parable of the prodigal son and the parable of dishonest manager. If we'd have read it, we would have seen that we have a wealthy father and a rich man. We have a son who squanders the father's wealth and a manager who squanders his master's wealth. We have a son who has a conversation with himself and we have a manager who has a conversation with himself. You may remember me saying a few weeks ago, if you were here, that when Luke talks about people having conversations with themselves, soliloquy, it's usually in the negative.

We have a son who acts out of self interest. He only decides to return to his father when it suits him. And we have a manager also acting in self interest. And Jesus starts with what he's saying to the disciples - 'there was a rich man'. And again, you may remember as we've had rich men being mentioned through Luke, that is always a little 'ooh ooh' moment. We need to be alert to the fact that when Luke says, put onto Jesus lips, 'there was a rich man', that we need to think of this person in a negative light and therefore we must be careful not to make the rich man analogous with God. But why should we view him negatively? It doesn't seem to be anything specific. Maybe the text implies that he accepted accusations against his manager without evidence. Maybe he's rich, wealthy, because he's exploited his debtors.

Now, they may be tenant farmers with him as the landlord, or he may be in the business of commerce, because the language just speaks of the currency of debt. Certainly the debts are large - in the first case, a year and a halves wages. In the second, eight years; and the rich man fires his manager; what we would know as summary dismissal, the manager would have held the written records of the debts. That was the job, he was managing the rich man's household and his affairs, he would have held the ledges of the debts. And the language here, is the rich man is saying, 'Give me back the ledgers', when it says, 'Give me an account for your managing', 'give me back the written records of the money that's owed to me'. And then the manager talks to himself. Again, as I said, review these conversations negatively. He's still in possession of the debt ledger.

The debtors don't know that he's been fired. We know this because they respond to his summons. If he'd been fired, they'd ignore the summons. We need to understand a little bit about how things operate in that culture, the context in the first century. So unlike creditors today who issue a statement of debt, those of you who are unfortunate enough to still have mortgages or have got loans or credit cards, your creditor issues you the statement telling you what you still owe. It didn't work that way in this context; it was the debtor who wrote an IOU and submitted it to the manager, who then held the records. So it's not strange for the debtors to be told to rewrite the IOU. It might be strange to be told to rewrite it, but it's not strange for them to be the ones doing it. It would be quite normal.

Imagine going to the bank or the mortgage company and saying, this statement of accounts, I'm just going to adjust it and reduce it. You'd be laughed out of the door, wouldn't you? Chances of getting away with it are nonexistent.

But what is the manager or the ex-manager that the debtors don't realise is the ex-manager, what's he doing here? The conversation he had with himself tells us that he hopes to be welcomed by the debtors after he loses his job. When they get to know that he has been fired, he is no longer managing the affairs of the rich man.

Now, we might read this as being welcomed into the home or house as suggesting hospitality. Maybe when I'm out of a job, I'm not in a good financial position, I may be a bit homeless, I can't afford good food. They will welcome me and be hospitable. Now, that may be some of the meaning, but there is a play on words here. The word used for house is one of my favourite Greek words, because I like saying it - 'Oikoi'- it's got a better ring than bungalow or house. Oikoi.

The servant's role as a manager, the word is 'oikonomos', manager of the household. It won't take much for you to realise it's where we get our word economist from. He's saying, maybe I can ingratiate myself with these people who owe my master money, so that when I'm out of a job, they will maybe give me a job, they will welcome me into their house as their household manager. I wonder whether those debtors would employ him because they now realise that he's a bit of a dubious character. It seems self-defeating to me. But they don't know he's been fired. They assume he's acting on the authority of his boss. They'd be very happy about the reduction of debt. And then when the rich man finds out, he's got a problem because does he go to his debtors and say, no, you've got to rewrite it, he wasn't acting on my authority;

so it looks as though he's incompetent at overseeing his staff, but he's also got to look very ungenerous because his manager has made him look very generous. Can you see why the rich man is in a bit of a conundrum, and he seems to have a sneaking admiration for the actions of his former employee.

But then we have this strange suggestion from Jesus, and he's turning to the disciples, but the Pharisees are overhearing - if we'd carried on to verse 14 and not stopped at 13, we'd hear that the Pharisees are still on the scene. Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so when it is gone, they, the friends you've made, may welcome you into the eternal homes, or their eternal homes. Now, commentators have various thoughts on this, but I wonder whether we need to have a bit of a sense of humour when we come to this parable. And Jesus is being ironic because these hypothetical friends haven't got eternal homes to invite the disciples into. The suggestion is absurd. So what are you on about, Jesus? It doesn't matter how much money we throw at them to get them to be our friends, they can't invite us into eternal homes. You can just imagine Jesus saying, that's my point.

And then we have Jesus talking in the familiar words about being faithful in little, and you will then be allowed to be faithful with much. If you've been dishonest with little, you're going to be dishonest with much. If you can't be faithful with dishonest wealth, how can you be trusted with true riches? And he's speaking of eternal life, life in the kingdom of God. If you can't be faithful with another's wealth, you're not going to be given your own wealth. And he makes it clear that a person can serve wealth in the old language, Mammon, which has much more broader meaning than just money. You can serve wealth or you can serve God. You can't do both. No pun intended, you pay your money, you take your choice.

Maybe part of what Jesus was teaching through the parable was that the focus of the manager on money or wealth was as a means to an end. Now, don't get me wrong, wealth and money is not in and of itself a problem. How often are we told to give the resources that we have to those who haven't got, the poor? So wealth in and of itself is not the issue, it's where the focus is, what we are serving. We see that through the gospel accounts, particularly Matthew and Luke, that Jesus teaches that we are stewards of what we have and what has been entrusted to us, we are not the owners, firstly, to meet our own needs, but then the needs of those around us. A few weeks ago, we looked at the parable of the rich fool who failed to do that, instead intended to keep everything to himself, building bigger and bigger barns, and lost it all.

And here, today, as we continue to mourn her death, I think our late Queen Elizabeth gives us a good example of having extravagant wealth, but not serving it, but serving God. Putting that wealth to use for the good of her people and the nation are just some examples of hosting events at Buckingham Palace, Sandringham, Balmoral, so the people can be honoured for what they've done, or using it to host world leaders, entertain them and promote the United Kingdom. The list could go on. You may have better examples of it than me, but first and foremost, we saw in many ways that she declared her faith in God, her faith in Jesus, the God she served, the God who had blessed her with incredible wealth. But she saw herself as a steward of it.

So my prayer today, both individually and as a community of followers of Jesus, that we would simply serve God whilst being good stewards, good managers of what we have. How that might work out in

practice, individually or corporately, remains to be seen, but work it out we must, particularly in this time of economic crisis. It's something that we will need as a church to consider how we use the resources that we have, first for our own needs and then for the needs of those around us.

We haven't solved the conundrum of the 17 ways to approach that parable, but maybe something gives us food for thought. Amen.