

Sunday September 22nd Luke 16: 1-13

I normally love preparing sermons – spending time thinking through the Bible passage – considering what it meant when it was written and what it could mean for us today – but ever so often I get a reading that I'd rather someone else preached on!! Today is one such occasion – but let us pray that we will still hear God speaking to us through this parable.

Prayer: Father God, help us to hear your voice beyond the printed word this morning and with the help of Your Holy Spirit allow it to challenge and transform us. Amen

Jesus parables are not always simple, realistic stories – but often tales of unusual and unexpected situations designed to challenge what is typically accepted as the norm and to get those around him, and us thinking and re-thinking!

We have an extra difficulty in that we approach them with 21st century Western materialistic eyes – where money and status are highly valued. We risk focusing solely on the material aspects and our sense of justice and failing to hear what Jesus was actually saying.

The story is about a dishonest manager who, following the threat of dismissal because of his dishonest behaviour, cheats his rich master out of even more money. He does it by buying friendships with those who owed his master money through significantly reducing their debts. We are surprised by his actions and his audacity to defraud his master even more and dislike his approach to buy friendships! So we'd expect a condemnation of his actions but instead we are totally surprised by the unexpected commendation for his behaviour!

This just can't be right! Surely Jesus isn't telling us to make money whatever way we can to protect ourselves, irrespective of the cost to others and ignore all the rules? That doesn't sound consistent with what we're taught elsewhere in the Bible!

When things don't appear to be consistent with everything else we know about God and Jesus – then we definitely need to look and think deeper.

I deliberately chose our Gospel reading from the Message – a paraphrase by Eugene Peterson – as I think it helps to shed a little more light on what is really being said. Although Eugene Peterson was an academic specialising in Biblical languages – he deliberately chose to translate the Bible into everyday American market-place talk so that those around him would grasp its meaning, rather than have every word translated with 100% accuracy of the original text. Although sometimes how it comes across to us Brits can rile us – like the last verse - *you can't serve God and the Bank* - as my father was a banker – and some of you are too!

But I want to focus on is - *The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live...*

With that in mind, perhaps this story is all about crisis management – and we're definitely facing placing of them in our country at the moment with Brexit and globally with climate change.

Here was a manager who had been cheating his boss and has been found out. Not surprisingly his master calls him in and tells him in no uncertain terms – you're fired. He deserved it! But what is surprising is that this manager doesn't argue for his rights or more time – as is normally the

middle-eastern custom. Maybe he realised just how generous his master is in just dismissing him rather than jailing him – and he is given some time to put the books in order.

Perhaps this manager had been lazy, or really good at fiddling expenses but now the stark reality of what he is losing confronts him. He is facing unemployment and the humiliation of using the foodbank. What can he do? He has to act fast, he doesn't have much time. What bothers his master's clients more than anything? It was their debt. Nothing new there!

The news wouldn't yet reached them yet that he's been fired. There's no social media, so he decides to meet with them and reduce their debt, which for all we know might have been his own cut in the first place. But this is now a win-win situation. He suddenly becomes the person who is caring, generous and considerate to them so when they see him in need - they will help him out! He was commended for acting astutely – not for the action itself.

I wonder how we respond when there's a potential crisis looming? Do we hide our head in the sand and hope things will just continue as normal? I know that's often my preferred choice! It's quite warm and cosy in the sand – especially as we get older!

But could Jesus be challenging us – those who follow him – to act instead? What about the crisis of climate change? Should we do nothing? What about debt – and loan sharks? What about slavery today and the misuse of workers and their rights? What about changes to the abortion law that are quietly being ushered in, in Northern Ireland?

Unfortunately following Jesus isn't about living a quiet life and building up a comfortable lifestyle for ourselves. There is always be a conflict of interest between following God and living according to the materialistic, self-indulgent life around us. As the reading concludes - we cannot serve God and money.

While we're probably not ready to make major changes or champion causes across the world, maybe God is challenging us to do those small things that we can – and if we prayerfully follow His guiding then we could be surprised as to where this leads.

Perhaps the key message of this parable is to act in the face of crisis rather than be paralysed by fear. But I'd like to conclude with some brief thoughts about the master in the parable. These are as a result of reading this book *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* by Kenneth Bailey. When we can understand more of the Middle Eastern perspective we may can an insight into how those living around Jesus would have heard it.

The master was obviously all important – and in most parables the master depicts God. The parable just before this one, is the prodigal son, which speaks of the overwhelming love of God Father in accepting back the son who has just wasted everything his Father had worked all his life for and sacrificed to give him. It depicts God as displaying outrageous love – probably a new concept for most of Jesus' hearer!

Now in this parable we see the master demonstrating undeserved mercy towards this dishonest manager who should have been sacked there and then and jailed for the rest of his life. So how is such mercy rewarded? Our immediate impression is that it is abused because the manager further defrauds the master. However there is no outcry from the master over the manager's action; only praise. The master does nothing to reinstate the debts or demand recompense from the manager. The manager is fully aware that the master cannot be anything but merciful. He doesn't withdraw his mercy

So here is an outrageous thought - could it be that the master was actually thrilled that something of his mercy and generosity is now being experienced by others? That others too have their debts reduced and they are enjoying a new found freedom? It may be outrageous but it certainly fits with the image of God that Jesus continually portrayed. Mercy triumphs over justice! Does God's unconditional love challenge our sense of justice?

Could it be that God is calling us to rethink what we think about Him, money, one another – and about the Jesus who we say we follow? Maybe God wants us our thoughts to spur us into everyday action? No longer holding too tightly to what we have but generously giving to others?

Merciful God, we cannot find a comparison large enough to express your superabundant mercy to us; teach us to overflow with that mercy towards others and to live and act daily in the ways demonstrated by Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

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