

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
SOCIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY
SUNDAY 26 SEPTEMBER 2010
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Luke 16: 1-14; Luke 16: 19-26

"Justice in God's Book"

"And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." Luke 16:9

The parable of the unjust steward is said to be one of the most difficult to interpret parables in the New Testament. Scholars have been wrestling with it extensively and have come up with all sorts of solutions, but none of them really conclusive. From whatever angle you look at it, it remains an unruly piece of scripture that doesn't want to give us a clear and unequivocal message. No unambiguous simple directions for life emerge from it, no clear judgements or views are easily derived from it.

Some have gone so far as to say Jesus can't have told this story, or that his encouragement in verse 9 to follow the example of the unjust steward could never have come from him. It is simply unthinkable they say, that Jesus would in any shape or form condone the behaviour of the unjust steward. It is just not possible. And of course there are all sorts of ways in which biblical scholarship, once it is convinced something doesn't fit in with a particular view of who and what Jesus was and what he may, or may not, have said, can make the issue go away.

A later addition, a stray story, perhaps verse nine belonged somewhere else and went walk-about in the text without anybody noticing. Perhaps the "I" in verse nine doesn't apply to Jesus, but does apply to the rich man of the story. It's odd for a rich man to praise his steward for wasting his money for his own benefit, but hey, this is always better than Jesus encouraging what is clearly unethical behaviour. And once verse nine has been smoothed away, what follows in verses 10 - 14 are just loose comments Jesus made about faithfulness and about money being bad for our soul. And that we can all agree on, would fit in with the picture most of us have of Jesus: Morally upright and ethically incorruptible, and promoting these values amongst his followers.

I have a very high regard for biblical stories. And an even higher regard for those who wrote them down. Not because I think the writers of biblical texts were divine typewriters, but because I think every word and every thought was weighed before they put it down. And that after the words had been put down the text went through an even more rigorous process of faithful congregations reading them, weighing them, evaluating and discussing them, some comparing them with other sources, until the text we have today came about.

Over the centuries, especially when the text was translated from Greek (or sometimes Aramaic) into Latin, and back into Greek, or copied by hand in low light conditions, when manuscripts were written on the back of other manuscripts and so got sometimes confused, accidents happened with the text.

All that is possible and has to be looked at very carefully when we interpret a biblical text. But we need to make sure it doesn't become an excuse to take out of the text what we don't like or what offends our sense of propriety.

In the case of verse nine, I believe it is just too easy to smooth the issues away by pulling the verse into the story and ascribe "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes" to the master of the unjust steward. However uncomfortable or unwelcome, and agreeing that the content is not what we expect from him, grammatically and linguistically it is most likely the "I" applies to Jesus.

So what if it does? How can we then understand the story?

Is he really saying that people like Bill Gates and big businesses like McDonalds are earning their way into the eternal home by using some of their riches to buy the goodwill of the people? (And market their businesses in the bargain as we heard from Dr Paul Harrison at *Mind Body Spirit* a month ago?) That Bill Clinton getting the richest people on earth together for a ridiculously extravagant party to flaunt their charity is a legitimate way of supporting the poor that probably suffered for that money in the first place? That the Church might even make money in a way that is unethical, as long as it is used for the promotion of its programs? That dishonest wealth is ok, so long as you do some good with it? Is that just(ice)?

It may well be one of the things the parable is designed to do: to make us see the shades of grey and make us think about wealth and what it can do for us in the longest term. To wake us up by making us think about this seemingly straightforward and contrary message.

Let us take a couple of steps back.

Jesus is telling this story in a context where Pharisees and lawyers have attacked him over being too easy going with sinners and tax collectors. He is telling the story to them, as well as to his friends, who are there with him.

It's told after the stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son. Stories, as we have seen in the last two weeks, about a wasteful householder, an irresponsible shepherd and a too generous father. It is followed by the story of the Rich man and poor Lazarus. Even further back we heard about the rich fool who kept building bigger barns only to discover he couldn't take anything with him when he died. Which is exactly what the Rich man finds out after he has ignored Lazarus sitting at his gate during his life time.

A bit further on we hear about the Rich young ruler who can't let go of his riches and of Zacchaeus who manages to do what he can't: give away his riches and open his home to Jesus. These stories have been very carefully put together to mirror, support and reinforce each other. They speak together of a message that takes the intricacies and murkiness of life into account.

Money is bad. Sure. But it can do good things. Squandering your Lord's money is bad. Sure. But in this case it brings some good to those who have been extorted by this unjust steward before.

Dishonesty is bad. Sure. But it can sometimes be shrewd too.

So, does Jesus condone money, the squandering of it and dishonest behaviour? No, of course not. But he's got you thinking hasn't he?

Now think back to that lost coin. And the over the top party that followed. To that lost sheep, and the hundred that were left in the wilderness. To that lost son that was welcomed back to a sumptuous feast, even where he had squandered his inheritance.

What Jesus is accused of by the Pharisees and lawyers - true examples of what were the upright and morally sound people of his day - is of squandering his (their) inheritance. Of welcoming the lost home with no strings attached. Of handing out grace as if it didn't cost anything, eliminating debt as if there wasn't a God they are all accountable to. "You can't do that Jesus" is what they say. Where will we end up? Squandering God's riches, joining the ones who are in God's debt and waive their indebtedness as if it didn't mean anything?

Some argue that what the unjust steward takes off the bill is nothing but his own profit margin, and so uses his own money to buy the hearts of his master's debtors. Some say he was taking off the interest his master wasn't allowed to charge according to the law anyway and that his shrewdness lies in making his master follow the law and helping himself in the bargain. Does it matter?

A little further on in the gospel, where we hear about Zacchaeus, scholars say similar things about him: that he only gave back what the people he had extorted were entitled to anyway, that he did no more than follow the law and wasn't that generous after all.

Neither story is about legal intricacies however. And how these things worked at the time, is, to a certain extent, immaterial. What is important, is that the unjust steward turns the losing of his socially secure position with his earthly master into the securing of a secure eternal one for himself with his eternal master. That Zacchaeus turns from a tax collector who extorts in the name of his Roman masters into a generous donor to those who have been short changed by him. That where the rich young ruler turns away sadly, Zacchaeus embraces Jesus program of giving away his riches and follows the instructions of verse 9 in his own way: making friends to gain access to an eternal home by letting go of his wealth and changing allegiance from the masters of this world to the master of another economy. What is important is that somehow both the unjust steward and Zacchaeus end up on the other side from where they started. Where the rich fool, the rich young ruler and the Rich man in the story of the Rich man and the poor Lazarus don't.

What Luke tells us in his gospel is that there is a chasm gaping between the Rich Man and the poor Lazarus, between the unjust steward and the people that pay the bills he prepares for them, between Zacchaeus the tax collector and the people from whom he was taking more than he was rightfully entitled to. Luke sees a chasm between rich and poor that can only be closed if the rich change sides, open their gates, and let mammon lose its grip on their lives. If not, money becomes a serious deterrent for them to become part of the Kingdom.

The Rich young ruler finds this too hard. Although he is an upright and moral person he can't get his head around the radical choice Jesus wants him to make. The Rich fool can't see beyond the security of his life here and now and loses out on a security that is far more valuable than all his barns together. The eldest son, example of uprightness and moral behaviour in the story of the lost son, finds the unjust steward opposite him. He who never squandered, was never dishonest, would never have tried to make friends at his father's expense, opposite the unjust steward who does all these things. And finds his behaviour condoned.

Where does Jesus want his disciples, us, to end up? Not with the unjust and dishonest I am sure. And they would have known that. But neither does he want his followers to be on the side of those who are so rigid in their uprightness that there is no room for generosity and splashing out in favour of those who are lost.

The important question the two stories we read this morning confront us with is on which side of the chasm we intend to end up. With the upright eldest who finds it difficult to share in the joy of his

father of the return of the prodigal. Are we with the Pharisees who worry about morality and propriety and being too generous with God's grace? Or are we with the lady who spends all her money celebrating the return of one lost coin, the shepherd silly enough to abandon all caution and go looking for one sheep while leaving the rest in the wilderness? Are we with the Rich man who has kept his gates closed all his life, or with Lazarus who was waiting for those gates to open, for something to happen, for someone to let go of what was theirs, for someone to, somehow, give him a leg up.

Of course it matters if that is an ethically correct leg up. But not the most important. What is most important is that the lost are found, the sinners find their way home, the rich open their gates to the poor, the upright let go of their self-righteousness, the cautious join the God who is never cautious where loving generous over abundant grace is concerned. Amen.