

## **Wise stewardship**

**A sermon preached by Lay Minister Tony Lemon at St Peter's, Wolvercote on 18 September 2016**

*Luke 16, v.8 'And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.'*

It isn't difficult to guess why our Old Testament and Gospel readings, and also today's Psalm, have been linked together in the Lectionary. There are common concerns for the poor, and condemnation of those who oppress them and those whose primary focus is upon material gain. Amos (8, 4-7) is forthright in condemning the sharp practice of those who oppress the poor and pervert justice, and this seems to link with the questionable practices of the master in our Gospel reading. Our Psalm (113, 6) says 'He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ashes to set them with princes' – a clear precursor of the Magnificat. Most familiar of all is the saying at the end of our Gospel reading about God and mammon – one of those biblical sayings that has entered the language and remained part of everyday discourse. All these passages encourage us to look at issues of wealth, poverty and inequality, and the structures that sustain them. And they are not alone, of course – we remember the man who built extra barns to store his crops, Jesus' saying about passing through the eye of a needle, and the parable of Dives and Lazarus which follows today's Gospel in Luke's narrative. These are some of the best-known parts of the Bible, perhaps precisely because they make those of us in the rich world acutely uncomfortable and they contribute to a sense of injustice to those for whom life is a material struggle.

The parable of the dishonest steward or manager is also very familiar to us, perhaps more than anything else because of that saying at the end, about God and mammon. But this is actually *not* a parable about money – the sayings about money and possessions have been tacked on by Luke and confuse its purpose. The parable itself is one of the most difficult to understand and has been variously interpreted. Henry Wansborough, for example, questions whether the steward was really dishonest, calling him crafty; Tom Wright renames this passage 'the parable of the shrewd manager'. The steward was a slave, but had a position of great responsibility. When his master accuses him of mismanagement – perhaps embezzlement, but this is not clear – and effectively dismisses him, the steward acts in a way that will win him friends and enable him to avoid destitution, by reducing people's debts to his master. He may well not have robbed his master in doing so. One theory is that he may have simply removed his own commission, which would not have been dishonest. Or it may be that he removed the element of interest. Jews were forbidden to charge interest, but many people got round this by lending in kind, with oil and wheat being easy commodities to use for this purpose. Oil is more easily adulterated with other liquids, so a lender presumed that it would be and charged more – hence the greater reduction in respect of oil than of wheat in the parable. Again, if this is what the steward was doing, it was not dishonest, but it was certainly astute, because his master would hardly be in a position to complain given the dishonesty, in terms of Jewish law, of what he himself was doing. His master, recognising this, even commends the steward – perhaps we may read into this an element of cynical congratulation – for the astute way in which he has retrieved the situation for himself.

The second half of verse 8 takes us from the master's sardonic commendation to Jesus' own comment, 'the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light'. For once I think the New English Bible has a clearer translation: 'the worldly are more astute

than the other-worldly in dealing with their own kind'. Clearly Jesus is not commending dishonesty: rather he recognises the steward's far-sighted realism, his resourceful acumen. By his lights, the man is very successful, and enterprise deserves acknowledgement. The other-worldly, Jesus says, are less shrewd and resourceful in attaining their ends. If only those who profess to be religious would give as much attention to spiritual things, which they claim to be so important, as other people do to material things, then the world would be a better place for the example of their discipleship.

Jesus is not commending those who enrich themselves, much less those who indulge in sharp practice in the process. To understand this parable we need to think about the audience and context. In a first-century Jewish story about a master and a steward, the master would be understood to be God and the steward would be Israel. Israel is supposed to be God's property manager, responsible to God and set over his possessions. But, as we've seen in our readings from Luke over the past few weeks, Israel has failed in this task, and is threatened with God ending its stewardship. How can it avoid this? The Pharisees' answer was to tighten the regulations of the law still further, to try to make Israel more holy. In practice this meant that they were excluding the very people whom Jesus was reaching out to. Jesus' answer to Israel's crisis is to throw caution to the winds: to forget the extra laws and to make friends where they can. That's what the 'children of this age' would do, and the 'children of the light' – meaning the Israelites – should do so too, learning from the shrewd people of the world how to deal with the crisis facing their generation. Instead of hoarding money and land, use it to make friends.

How can this be applied to our own day? This is a question which I suspect would provoke a lively discussion session, or perhaps several. It has both secular and religious applications. To begin with the secular, politicians in the developed world could usefully reflect on it in seeking to reverse the dissatisfaction which is leading people to identify with extremist or ultra-nationalistic parties. The leaders of the EU might see the need for fresh, radical thinking as they confront diverging interests in the north-west, Mediterranean and eastern European member states, as well as rising levels of opposition to the whole European project.

In spiritual terms, the meaning of the parable for all of us is not difficult to discern. Jesus is saying that people are often more zealous in pursuing material than spiritual objectives. We all know how tempting this is in our personal lives: for most of us it is perhaps a natural inclination which we need to resist. And it is a temptation too in our lives together as churches and congregations: we can all identify with the physical manifestations of growth that are tangible evidence of progress. They are important and such growth is indeed a sign of the vitality of the church. But such things are not ends in themselves: what matters is that we use them as we intend to, for the glory of God – to bring others to faith. Tom Wright applies this parable more generally to the church as a whole, as it passes through turbulent times. Like first-century Israel the church needs to reassess what matters and what doesn't. What should traditional, so-called 'mainline' churches do to arrest their decline? Perhaps, he suggests, they need to throw caution to the winds – to think unconventionally, be prepared to make new friends across traditional barriers and rediscover true fellowship in the Gospel.