

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 23/9/07 10.00am
Trinity 16
1 Tim. 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

People sometimes claim that the Bible has nothing to say about modern life, so to have the word “manager” cropping up throughout this morning’s Gospel might make us stop and think. After all, we’re supposed to have more managers now than at any other time in history. In fact, the reading is even more topical than you may have suspected: the word translated here by “manager” is the Greek οἰκονόμος, which gives the English “economist”. A story of an economist conjuring money out of nowhere to reduce the bills others have to pay is rather close to home, given the financial news of the last weeks. That’s before anyone starts describing Peter from Galilee as the “northern rock”...

Anyway, Jesus is telling a story, a parable. What he’s trying to do is get his audience to think. So how do *you* react to the tale? The characters are real enough, the situation believable. There is no shortage of modern examples of breach of trust or fraud. If someone knows they’re about to be fired, it’s quite plausible that they should use the time remaining to feather their nest. The manager claims that he is “not strong enough to dig, and ashamed to beg”. Instead, he does what he’s good at, cooking the books, to enable him to stay on in that line of employment. (I do wonder, however, whether this is self-defeating: after all, if someone had tried to ingratiate themselves with you by ripping off their current employer, would you really take them on as an employee of your own?)

Anyway, when he’s found out, we expect him to be condemned. And this is where Jesus gives his listeners a shock. Instead of being punished for his wickedness, “his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly”. Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised. After all, as Jesus tells us, “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” The master’s attitude suggests that he himself might have been a bit of a shady operator in building up his own business empire. Mind you, we’re not told that he offered the manager his job back. But what does Jesus mean by this story, and the injunction “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes”?

Our God is a God of justice, and the idea of acting dishonestly or unjustly to receive his commendation seems nonsensical. The key may lie in that comment about “the children of this age” and “the children of light”. Many parables have a punchline with the phrase “how much more”, as in the line “If you ... know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). Perhaps the thrust of Jesus’ remark is this: “If secular people can use their resources for their own advancement in this life, how much more should religious people use their resources in order to enter into eternal life.”

Jesus is not advocating some sort of puritanism, saying that we should keep ourselves unsullied by the world. Instead, he’s saying that we should get stuck in, using “dishonest wealth” to reach “the eternal homes”. The suggestion is that the correct religious attitude to money – in fact, to all material possessions – is not to love it or hate it, to get embarrassed about it or try politely to ignore it, but to use it. Think how many parables relate to this message: the servant who buries his talent in the ground, the man who pulls down his barns to build bigger ones and so on. In fact, Luke has very suggestively placed this parable between two others. It comes straight after the Prodigal Son, in which, after spending all his money, the Prodigal is forgiven and welcomed home while the self-righteous elder brother, who has made a point of never asking for a penny, stays outside the party. And this story of the dishonest steward is followed by the tale of the rich man and Lazarus, when the tables are turned in heaven: the rich man who never gave the beggar a scrap of food in this life pleads for him to give him a drop of water in the next.

There seems to be a theme here, which illuminates this unexpected conclusion to the story in today’s Gospel. Yes, true wealth is spiritual wealth, but there is a danger in underestimating our material possessions, since we can use them to positive effect. It’s interesting, and may be significant, that there are two stages to Jesus’ command: “*Make friends for yourselves* by means of dishonest wealth so that, when it is gone, *they* may welcome you into the eternal homes.” The means of entering heaven is not wealth but friendship, and true friendship, of course, endures once the money has run out.

Incidentally, if you are perplexed by this phrase “dishonest wealth”, you might like to think back to the older translations which render this phrase as “the mammon of unrighteousness”. “Mammon” is an Aramaic word meaning “wealth” or “property”, but very often it is personified, like a sort of belief system in itself, hence the verse “you cannot serve God and Mammon”. A suitable modern alternative, given that we don’t really have a name for a god of wealth, would, I think (Bible translators take note!), be “materialism”: “you cannot be a slave to God and materialism”. As for the adjective, you can take your pick between “dishonest” and “unjust”: materialism may cause people to be dishonest in pursuit of gain, and it thrives off injustice because some have more and others have less.

So Jesus encourages us to use our material possessions without becoming enslaved by them, without treating them as an end in themselves, but as a means to build up our human relationships which will be of lasting value in the kingdom of God. It’s a difficult line to tread, particularly given the danger of being ensnared by the materialism of the world around us, which often fails to comprehend even the smallest acts of generosity. You may remember the booklet of generous actions for Lent, developed by the Diocese of Birmingham. One of the ones which I found quite difficult was leaving a pound in a shopping trolley for someone else: every time I tried, people used to run after me with the coin! But then, maybe that was the idea of those actions, not to do anonymous acts of kindness, but to be drawn in to speaking about God’s generosity, which is not impersonal, but comes from knowing us as we are and calling us into his friendship.

We’re not expected to be financial wizards any more than dishonest managers: it is heartening that Jesus knows that “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light”. But that’s not an excuse: we can’t hope to bury our talent in the ground and get away with it. After all, with whose possessions are we dealing? The manager was making free not with his own property, but his master’s. And we could very well say that all we have in this life is not really our own, but God’s. As Jesus says, “If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?” So let us use what we have to build up God’s kingdom on earth, to invest in what matters, in the hope that the friends we make will welcome us into the communion of saints and an eternal, lasting, home with God which we may truly call our own. **Amen.**