

HYMNS: **34** **“O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness”**
 595 **“Lord, we have come at your own invitation”**
 563 **“O Jesus I have promised”**
 658 **“A charge to have I”**

READINGS: **1Timothy 2:1-8**
 Luke 16: 1-13

“JESUS’S WEIRDEST PARABLE?”

Did you listen carefully to our reading from Luke? What did you make of it? If you were puzzled, you are not the first to be so and you will not be the last!

We are used to Jesus telling parables to get his followers to think, to tease then almost into thinking differently and to begin to imagine what the Kingdom of God can be like. But it seems that this parable is just too much! This is, arguably, the strangest, weirdest parable in the whole of the Gospels. The beginning of Luke 16 is known both as the ‘Parable of the Dishonest Steward’ in one translation and ‘The Parable of the Shrewd Manager’ in another. Can it be both? This is indeed one of the most debated and debatable parables in the whole New Testament.

It was very tempting for me to divert from this set lectionary reading and go for a more straightforward passage. But our faith is a continual challenge and so we should not dodge Biblical passages which we find challenging.

So just in case you struggled to follow the story line – let me give you a summary.

There was a wealthy business man who had a manager and he got wind of the fact that this manager was being careless in his work for him, wasteful or even cheating him. So the wealthy man called his manager and asked him to present his accounts. So the manager saw the writing on the wall and knew his job was on the line. So he began to think about what he would do – he did not fancy manual labour and the prospect of having to beg was shameful. So the manager had to do a bit of quick thinking and came up with Plan B which would win him friends when he had lost his job.

So the manager called his boss’s debtors and forgave them a sizeable proportion of their debt so that they should be indebted to him personally. The boss found out what has been going on and how his scheming manager had reduced the bills of his debtors behind his back. The boss called his manager and said the most incredible thing to him, “you shrewd schemer – you have outwitted me, you have acted very smartly.”

Then to make this parable all the more incredible, Jesus adds his own commentary,

“and I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone you will have lasting relationships.”

What is this? The manager is swindling his master and Jesus approves and tells us to do the same!

You will find in the commentaries many explanations for this parable – here comes the one that I find most convincing.

Jesus’ hearers would know well enough the economic situation of their time and they are not in fact that different from the economics of our own time. Rich people were able to charge high rates of interest to those who were in their debt – it was then as it is now an unequal world when it comes to money.

So those who listened to this parable would be well aware that the wealthy man’s debt contracts included exorbitant rates of interest often hidden from illiterate peasants. The manager, in his turn, was in all likelihood charging not only these exorbitant rates but adding in his own cut, too.

The manager in calling in the debtors and reducing their amount may have actually just been removing his own cut or he may also have been forgiving most of the interest that his master had put on. Either way it was exorbitant interest that was being removed.

If, as seems certain, the wealthy landowner was a Jew he would have known the Torah which condemns the charging of interest and which puts forward the Jubilee principle of forgiving debts every few years.

Was the manager using the master’s tools – money – to dismantle the master’s house – the unjust debt structures which kept so many people in poverty? Well, if that were the case, it would go some way towards explaining why Jesus could commend the manager.

Throughout his gospel Luke is concerned about our relationship with money and wealth and how that affects our relationships with other people. Neither Luke nor the other gospels is against wealth or wealthy people – they just want to make people aware of how corrosive the love of money can be for relationships. Luke’s gospel is shot through with references to wealth and how wealth can so easily corrupt relationships. So we hear Mary in the Magnificat speaking of how God has put down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. Then there is the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who after having met Jesus is moved to return money to those he has defrauded.

We also need to situate this parable within the context of Luke’s gospel starting a bit further back in Chapter 15. Two groups of people were listening to Jesus – let us here Luke himself describe who they were, “now the tax-collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and religious teachers of the law muttered. This man Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So Jesus began telling parables – about the lost and the found – the one sheep that went astray from the 99, the woman who lost her coin and the father who lost his prodigal son. Straight after those parables Luke relates Jesus telling about the rich man Lazarus and the poor man Dives. All these stories about lost people and found people – those who are lost but think they are found (the Pharisees) and others who know they are lost and want to be found (the tax-collectors and sinners). Jesus made it very clear which group were more likely to bring a smile to God's face.

So let us return to our swindling manager – he was dishonest and he got the sack for it but he came to realise that the way he had been living was wrong and he changed his life style and turned his value system around. Whereas, in the past he had used money – other peoples' – to enrich himself now he was using money to enrich or at least refrain from impoverishing others and he begins to use money to establish relationships of mutual benefit. In the context of this section of Luke's gospel – he had been lost and now is found.

The Pharisees, Jesus' other listeners, just did not get what he was saying. They valued money and considered that having money was the same as having God's favour. Indeed, along with other religious leaders of the day they used their position to impose financial burdens on ordinary worshippers. So here we see Jesus reminding them that there are things in this world that are far more important than wealth – our relationship with God and with other people.

Jesus was always at pains to point out that the Kingdom of God is about relationships, it's about forgiving debts as we forgive our debtors as we say every time in the Lord's Prayer.

I don't know if you remember in the summer of 2013, Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury had a war on Wonga, the payday loan company that was charging exorbitant rates of interest and putting many people into a downward spiral of unpayable debt.

Welby met with the Head of Wonga and he reported on the meeting, "I've met the Head of Wonga and we had a very good conversation and we had a very good conversation and I said to him quite bluntly – we're not in the business of trying to legislate you out of business, we're trying to compete you out of business. We've got credit unions that are engaged in the community and much more professional. We are putting our money where our mouth is, we are setting up credit unions using church premises and church people.

In the years since 2013 a cap has been put on the interest rates of payday lenders like Wonga as a result of pressure from campaigners and credit union membership is growing.

When Justin Welby first criticised Wonga it came to light that the Church of England itself was, through the Church Commissioners, invested in Wonga. Now Wonga has changed, the Church of England is continuing to change and money is being used to build up relationships with poor people, help them to save and get them out of a cycle of debt.

How Jesus would have loved this story of Wonga and Welby!!

Let me reiterate – there is nothing evil about money. This Church has been the beneficiary of generous donations from wealthy individuals or the trust funds they have set up. We are able to employ a learning officer for the Museum thanks to the Rank Foundation and our scholarship scheme with The Leys School has been the direct result of a relationship with a wealthy Old Leysian.

The parable which we have looked at today prompts us to confront the nature of our relationship with money. Is it something which consumes us and cuts us off from others or is it something that we use to help others, to build relationships and, in the language of the gospels, bring the Kingdom of God nearer?

May God help us all as we think about our relationships and whether they are hindered or helped by how we regard money and wealth.