

Pentecost 17 (C)
23,2007
Luke 16:1-13
Hearn

September
St Peter's Box Hill
Preacher: Bishop George

HOW MUCH MORE

Two weeks ago I was stuck in traffic in Cairo. I had been trying to cross a busy road with seven lanes of traffic which in Cairo language means seventeen. I had waited patiently for a break in the traffic for nearly ten minutes and felt as if I was going to spend eternity there. A policeman noticed my plight and said "Five pounds and I will stop the traffic". \$1-50 seemed a bargain and I paid up and crossed the road.

Yet I felt uneasy about the transaction. That night back at my son's home I was sounding off about police corruption. Roger my son has lived and worked in the Middle East for the past five years and was not perturbed. "It's a cultural thing –the police are poorly paid"

It's a difference of understanding.

The gospel reading this morning is a bit like that.

The parable of the unjust Steward which forms the basis of this morning's gospel reading presents great difficulties for many Christians. Is Jesus commending a Christopher Skase type con job or fraud?

At first appearances it sounds like that.

A rich man heard that his manager was squandering his property and rents, and calls him to account. He is given notice and told to have the books audited. The manager desperate for his future takes the course of calling his master's debtors in one by one and reduces their debt by fifty or twenty percent; thus securing for himself people who will welcome him into their homes and obviously care for him in his old age. For this he was commended in the story by his master because he had acted shrewdly "***for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than children of light.***"

Whether the amount by which the steward reduced the debt was his own commission or not misses the point. This parable or story is not a lesson in corner cutting or creative accounting practices, nor is it commending dishonesty in business dealings.

Kenneth Bailey a Biblical scholar who specialises in the Middle Eastern background to the New Testament documents provides the important insight that we need to read this parable as with the others through middle eastern eyes and hear them with middle eastern ears.

He writes;

"Many earlier commentators worried over how Jesus could use a dishonest man as an example. But this need not delay us. The Middle Eastern peasant at the bottom of the economic ladder finds such a parable pure delight. Nothing pleases him more than a story in which some David kills a Goliath.

Yet there is an unusual feature to this story. The storyteller in the East always has a series of stories about the clever fellow who won out over the "Mister Big" of his community. The remarkable feature of this parable is that the steward is criticised as : unrighteous" and called "" a son of darkness." The average oriental storyteller would have no compulsion to add such a corrective to this type of story. Thus the Western listener\ reader is surprised at the use of a dishonest man as a hero. The Eastern listener\ reader is surprised that such a hero is criticised."

Bailey, Poet and Peasant, Page 105.

The parables of Jesus have a surprising list of unsavoury characters who reflect this principle. In addition to this steward there is the unjust judge, the neighbour who does not wish to be disturbed in the night, and the man who pockets someone else's treasure by buying his field.

Bailey notes;

"The parable of the Unjust Steward, whose conduct goes from bad to worse, is only the most outstanding example of a class of parables, the use of which appears to be a unique and striking feature of Christ's teaching."

"In three of the four cases mentioned Jesus is using a rabbinical principle of moving from " the light to the heavy" - which generally means **how much more**".

That is, if this widow got what she wanted from this kind of Judge by badgering him; how much more will you receive from God by persistent prayer? If this man got bread in the night from his neighbour(!:5-7) how much more will you receive from God? If this dishonest steward solved

his problem by relying on the mercy of his master to solve his crisis, how much more will God help you in your crisis when you trust his mercy? This gospel would not have created difficulties for those who first heard Jesus story.

-3-

They would have enjoyed it as the downfall of Mr Big. It only creates difficulties for people who think in concrete terms - which of course includes most of us who are the products of such a educational framework. Now I have given a longer introduction and more detail concerning the gospel text than usual this morning; and I will now start the sermon proper with the theme; **How much more?**

When faced with looming disaster the unjust steward took decisive action to safeguard his future. How much more can you when faced with an uncertain and threatening future be freed by God from personal paralysis or community indecision.

This gospel points to three areas where this truth is needed.

It is a call to

(1) RESPOND TO LIFE WITH CONFIDENCE

A popular writer on the Scriptures declares that this is a story about a dishonest manager, who when faced with a terrible catastrophe, recognises the catastrophe and immediately moves to do something about it.

This has special import for the life of any community, institution or church. Figures indicate that most mainline churches are aging and rapidly. What is happening in many churches is that when faced with what appears to be overwhelming odds they move into defensive mode. We circle the wagons and bunker down unwilling to fight a hopeless cause. Well if that is to be the response it would really be better to close down shop altogether. This parable declares that this is a bad way to live our lives as individuals or as a church or nation. If even dishonest and shrewd operators know how to move from the defensive to the offensive - how much more so ought we?

This parable is not a commendation for a half hearted, indecisive, defeatist attitude to life. It is a call to move confidently into the future knowing that it is God's future and that we are strengthened by his Spirit and power.

As a parish we have been spending some time this year in reviewing our life and parish priorities. How are we to move forward and plan

constructively for the future? This process will call for some brave decisions in the spirit of this gospel.

Some people feel overwhelmed by such a target. "How can I make any difference? I am too old? too busy? and sometimes too unsure how to live as a Christian without taking giant steps forward.

-4-

The gospel this morning has an almost paradoxical thought. It reminds us that many little steps make up a giant move. **Jesus reminds his followers; "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."** This gospel is a call

(2) TO FAITHFULNESS.

Each of us can be faithful in little things. Choosing to come to Church on a Sunday morning instead of having a sleep in is just one example. This principle permeates through our family life, business, employment, involvement in political affairs to the wider community.

Some translations use the word **Steward** instead of the word manager. Whilst earlier Christian writings especially used this word Steward to apply to Bishops and other Church leaders it has wider application.

" Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you have received." I Peter 4:10.

Ignatius a leader of the Church in the second century saw that faithfulness or stewardship was the mark of Christian community.

"Labour with one another, struggle together, run together, suffer together, rest together, rise up together as God's stewards and assessors and servants." Be pleasing to him in whose ranks you serve."

As Fred Craddock says of this parable

"Most of us in the coming week will not christen a ship, win (or lose an election), appoint a cabinet, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note to someone in distress or someone who rejoices, visit a nursing home, consider how to vote in the coming election, teach a Sunday School class, share a meal, tell a child a story or feed the neighbour's cat. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful in very much."

Christians are called to respond to life decisively and with faithfulness.

This parable is a call to respond

(3) THE FUTURE WITH HOPE.

In reality this parable is about eschatology - the future. Like the rest of the New Testament it consistently declares that the future is God's future.

-5-

We are called to be open to God's advent among us, to be watchful and ready. Ultimately we are not to worry over much about what tomorrow holds. Jesus told us that worry will get you nowhere.

Rather we are called to trust in God's future.

We always tend to confuse our understanding of the future with God's future. I have a good friend who deep down is a Calvinist without being aware of it. When disasters great or small come she sighs resignedly and says " Oh well!" In other words it is just as I expected. You can only accept it.

The New Testament tells us that we must allow God to lead us into an unexpected future, an unexpected future because it is not our future but God's. We are told an outrageous story of a man who makes some outrageous and dubious moves because he seems to be convinced that the future is amazingly open, surprising and not fixed. **How much more can we who believe and live with God's grace?**

This is not a call to a 'cargo cult religion.'" It is not a denial of pain or the rotten things that may happen in life.

It is a recognition that hope when mixed with God's grace adds a new dimension to life and the future. It provides new resources with which to cope with pain and suffering; it offers new possibilities for this life and the next. It offers the assurance that neither life nor death nor anything else in God's creation can separate from the love of the one who died for us and lives again for us.

This parable is indeed shocking. Not because of moral scruples concerning a tale of a steward who undertakes dubious and shocking tactics when faced with disaster.

This parable is outrageous and shocking because it tells us to move into the future with confidence, faithfulness and hope in the power and grace of God. The one who told the story is Jesus Christ, the one who not only told great stories but moved forward in the confidence of God. Even when he moved toward the cross he did so not as one resigned to blind fate but as one who confidently obeyed God; confident that the future belonged to God.

Such a shocking story is indeed good news!