

25TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C (2025)

Looking through some old sermons for inspiration, I realised to my shame that I haven't preached on today's Gospel reading for a very long time: because of the nature of the lectionary cycle, S. Luke's account of Jesus' Parable of the Shrewd Manager or Unjust Steward is only read once every three years (and even then it is optional!); and this Sunday six years ago was eclipsed by another Feast; and, three years ago was the Sunday after the late Queen's funeral. I expect that, on both occasions, I breathed a sigh of relief because I didn't have to tackle what is both a challenging passage to apply to contemporary Christian practice; and also, because it touches upon that most contentious and sensitive issue – our use of, and attachment to, money. But, today, tackle it we must.

On a superficial reading, it might seem that Jesus is praising the steward for his dodgy dealings, but a more detailed analysis reveals that that is not quite the case: read in the context of first century Judaism, and of Jesus' mission and ministry, this parable becomes less of a moral injunction, and more about the people of Israel's response to Jesus himself. And, as always when we read the Bible, it is important that we understand it in the context in which it was first written, because that gives us a greater insight into its original meaning, and a more accurate means for applying it to our own lives today.

And so, it is important to understand how this parable works: first, we note that this is a parable – a short narrative illustrating a lesson by comparison or analogy;

it is not intended to be taken literally. Secondly, we must grasp the workings of a society and a culture very different from our own. In Judaism in Jesus' day, Jews were forbidden to lend money at interest, but many people got around this by lending in kind, with oil and wheat being easy commodities to use for this purpose. And so, it is likely that what the steward deducted from the bill was the interest that the master had been charging, with a higher rate on oil than on wheat. If he reduced the bill in each case to the principal, the original amount that had been lent, then the debtors would have been delighted, and the master couldn't lay a charge against the steward without owning up to his own shady business practices. This is why, when the master found out about it, he could only admire the steward's clever approach.

But this parable isn't about commending sharp practice in business; rather, it is about God's people, Israel. It is clear by analogy that God is the master, and Israel is the steward. Israel is supposed to be God's property-manager, the light of God's world, responsible to God, and set over his possessions. But, as Luke's Gospel is at pains to point out, Israel has failed in the task, and is threatened with imminent dismissal. And, as is the case in so many of S. Luke's accounts of Jesus' parables, they point towards a moment of crisis: just as the steward faced a crisis, so too do the people of Israel – but their crisis is existential; and their only way out of it, so Luke believes, is that they should accept God's ultimate visitation among them in the person of Jesus his Son. But the vast majority didn't

do that, and were plunged, at length, into a deeper crisis: remember that S. Luke wrote his Gospel after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD – the crisis that he points towards has already happened, and the Jewish people have had the centre of their religion's cult destroyed. This meant that they would have to find new ways of relating to the world around them – assuring their survival by making friends with those outside the Jewish faith, by using wealth and possessions to do as the unjust steward had done – to garner favour with those from whom they might expect a *quid pro quo*.

And so, what are we to take from this parable? Well, because it addresses directly the generation for whom it was written, not a great deal. It is one of those passages of Scripture from which we cannot draw direct application, other than to infer a call to be both honest and prudent in all of our dealings, without falling into the temptation to seek our own security at the expense of that of others. What is pertinent to our situation, however, is what follows the parable: here we have not analogies or metaphors but direct sayings, which are intended as moral injunctions to all of Jesus' disciples, and in which we hear two of his most famous sayings – 'No man can serve two masters', and, 'You cannot serve God and mammon'.

And, whilst some have attempted to use this passage and Jesus' other teachings about money to argue for a radical redistribution of wealth, his words cannot be used to determine fiscal policy. Rather, what is called for is faithfulness, and for

a recognition that, like all of our possessions, money has the potential to become idolatrous, to corrupt us, and to lead us away from God. And this is where Jesus' teaching really hits home: because it is directed at all of his followers, however much or little money they might have, and whatever their status in life might be. At the heart of all of this is an attitude, because how we view our money and possessions is indicative of a disposition of the heart. It is not only the rich who can fall into the trap of idolising wealth and its pursuit; nor is being rich to be seen as sign of God's favour. Conversely, the state of poverty itself should not be thought to be a blessing – which it clearly is not; nor should we assume that those with less money are automatically more virtuous in the sight of God. No: what Jesus is reminding us, rich and poor alike, is that all our money and possessions are given to us on trust: what matters is how we use them, not only to God's glory, but also – and just as importantly – in the service of others; and, particularly, in helping to alleviate the suffering of those most in need. This precept should, of course, contribute to the formulation of political policy for social care, especially in a nominally Christian country; but it should also remind us of our personal obligations to charity, and of the need to make sure that we exercise probity in things both great and small.

S. Paul reminds us powerfully that 'the love of money is the root of all evil': we don't need to look very far to see that that is true. But, money and our possessions are transitory, and can be used only in this life: both life and

possessing will end at the same time with death. The value that we place upon what we own or earn is a direct consequence of our attachment to the things of this world. What matters eternally, and that for which we will all be called to give account, is how we have exercised stewardship of the good gifts that we have been given to show our fidelity to God, and our love for our neighbour. Ultimately, Jesus' teaching today is intensely personal, because it relates directly to our relationship with God, and makes clear that one of the chief obstacles to the health of that relationship is our attachment specifically to money. And, if I'm honest, this is why I find this Gospel passage so challenging: because I recognise that, living in a society in which we have a stagnant economy, in which the gap between the super-rich and the desperately poor is ever increasing, and in which charity and goodwill are at an all-time low, the matter of, and worries caused by, money is uppermost in many people's minds. And, whilst I don't believe that Jesus' teachings provide direct and obvious solutions to our personal or societal financial woes, I do believe that they provide binding moral and spiritual instruction, obliging all of us to get our priorities right, and to be as generous as we possibly can, thus showing in practice that money is not our master, nor are we the slaves of avarice. We cannot legislate for charity, either for love or for almsgiving; and this is why Jesus' injunctions apply only to those who truly follow him. But, for those who do, we can and must heed his teaching; and thereby show to those who do not that there is a better way. Amen.