

One very strange (and demanding) parable – 18th Sept 2016

You can't get away from the fact that today's gospel contains a very strange parable. Not one of Jesus' parables are 'easy' but some seem to have a more obvious direct meaning... whereas this one seems a bit odd to say the least – and the truth is that Christians have struggled throughout the centuries to make sense of it.

So what basically happens? Well you've got a master – who calls it with a bad manager, who has been squandering resources and says – that's it you're fired. The manager knows he's not fit enough for manual labour and too proud to beg panics about how he's going to survive – and then he has an idea. He races around his masters' debtors – the people who owed his master money – and slashes the bills. By doing this he hopes to gain friends who will look after him and welcome him into their homes when he's down on his luck.

So far so good – but then the master commends the manager's actions as shrewd and seems to praise his ingenuity. Now the problem for us is that in the parable, the Master represents Jesus or God – so is Jesus praising this kind of shrewd behaviour? To us it seems like a dodgy deal of some sort – murky – like tax avoidance or cash in hand and so is Jesus saying well done for being shrewd?

This is what sits uncomfortably with us – is Jesus suggesting that the “children of light” need to learn a bit of shrewdness from the “children of this age”?

I'm not sure – it's yet another bit of Jesus' teaching where you wish Jesus was physically here to just tease it out a bit more. But maybe there is an implication for us not to be naive – we need to be a bit streetwise in our dealings with the world.

But then the Gospel passage in Luke carries on with some very strong sentiments about money from Jesus – in fact he refers to money as a master – no servant can serve two masters – you cannot serve both God and money.

Now I don't think that money is inherently evil. I don't think that scripture teaches that money is inherently evil. I don't think that the call on every Christians life is to live in a cave, dressed in rags, eating wild berries, nuts and water from the stream. But I do think that money is one of the BIG TEMPTATIONS and also one of the big SPIRITUAL DEADENERS.

What do I mean by that? Well, I believe our central call is to follow the first commandment – love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself. Doing that means that your focus will be on worship, prayer, love of your neighbour, service to your community – but within a context of gentle loving kindness to yourself. It's a life that's lived openly and generously. That sees needs and seeks to *alleviate* them – to offer friendship, hospitality, shelter, wisdom.... to share laughter, kindness and grace. The focus is not on the self... the focus is on God and the wider community. Lived well this is a life of connectedness – with God and neighbour – a life

where we feel that we are flourishing and connected – it might be tough at times, it most probably will be – but when we live like this it feels good and open and grounded.

But the truth is the temptation to draw right in and focus on our own stuff, our own needs, our own goals, our own priorities is absolutely massive. And one of the big drives for that is money and material wealth.

It's a very commonly noted fact that people who have little are often more generous with the little they have, than those who have a lot. Even in my own life, I know that when I was a postgraduate student, on a very small income, my little house was full of people every Sunday having lunch together... but as I got older and my house got better and my stuff got better I didn't want so many people coming round and messing up my posher sofa!

The more money we have the more self-sufficient we are. We can easily feel that we don't need to rely on God so much – because money is our great security – nothing bad can happen to us, because we've got financial backing.

We can easily feel we don't need to rely on people so much because we can pay for our own stuff – we can pay for our own way in the world. When you haven't got as much money you share more – a community that's less wealthy might share their resources more – even this summer people have lent me camping equipment and tents. If I was wealthier, I might have just gone out and bought all that stuff – but not having the means to do that, I borrowed – and in the *borrowing* experienced love, care and friendship.

Money can act as a barrier to that. Money can create such a wall of self-sufficiency that we feel we have no need of God or of our neighbour. It effects our ability to live out that first commandment and can lead us down a road of greed and also a concrete avoidance of the suffering and poverty in other people's life – a "I'm alright Jack, sod the rest of you" attitude.

That's what I mean by *money being a spiritual deadener*. We are to be spiritually alive – open to God and open to living by the values of his kingdom – justice, joy, generosity, love, hospitality, compassion... but money can close that part of us down – so that our desires are selfish and entirely me focussed.

I think we could argue this morning that when capitalism loses any compassionate heart – and only pursues money – greed becomes a deadly cancer – which causes bank crisis, which in turn causes years of austerity and a lack of concern for the poor in our society. Materialism becomes an insatiable drug which we have to feed as a society – even though it makes us miserable and disconnects us from other people and ultimately from God.

Now we have to be wise about this. When I was 16 and a new Christian I loved this kind of sermon – I wanted to live sacrificially and radically. One night, my best friend came for a sleep over and she slept in my bed and I slept on a camp bed. We talked late into the night

and in the morning I woke up having slept just fine. I said to God, “Lord, when I’m an adult, I will never buy a bed. I will sleep my whole life on a camp bed – and give the money I save to the poor. I slept just fine on this camp bed last night.” My friend was staying for two nights and the second night I hardly slept a wink – I felt every bit of that uncomfortable camp bed and woke up stiff as a board. I had to revise my prayer and my camp bed promise the very next day!

Now, we can laugh at how naive I was – but I want to say that I still have something to learn from the courage of my 16 year old self – who longed to live a life grounded in gospel values – my intention was good. But it needed a bit more working out!

So challenging ourselves about our attachment to material wealth doesn’t mean that we should all live with nothing – no material goods at all – I don’t think that. I think that God wants us to live our life and enjoy our life – and part of that is about material goods. But I do think that every Christian has to look very seriously at the money they have and the goods that they own and ask themselves “how am I using this for good?”; “how am I sharing these resources?”, “am I pre-occupied by gaining more wealth – do I need to re-focus my attention on God and the things of God?”; “am I jealous of other people’s stuff?” – what do I need to practise more? Gratitude? Generosity? Living more simply? Being satisfied with less? How can I challenge myself and ask myself the question – who is my master – God or money? For most of us, this will be a hard question if we really ask ourselves properly. Whether we are poor, average or rich.... we have to be ready to admit the grip that money has on us.

Let’s pray for God’s help:

God of all,
when we have been quick to take advantage
and slow to be generous – forgive us.
When we have been quick to surrender integrity
and slow to be truthful – forgive us.
When we have been quick to abandon responsibilities
and slow to be faithful – forgive us.
When we have been quick to give in to greed
and slow to be satisfied – forgive us
In Jesus name. **Amen.**

Sermon notes from 18/9/16. Revd Sheridan James.