

19th September 2010 – Trinity 16 (Proper 20)
The Unjust Steward

Readings: Amos 8; 4-7
Luke 16; 1-13

One of the features of the Lectionary we have been using in recent years is that over a period of three years the whole of the four gospels are covered in our readings. And that means including passages that would not perhaps be a preacher's first choice; and I have to admit that today's gospel reading would not be my first choice.

In many of Jesus' parables it is easy to identify, and identify with, the characters described. The parable which comes immediately before today's gospel is the story of the prodigal son, in which each of the three main characters has something to teach us.

But today's passage is much more puzzling. Let's look at the story.

There was a master whose steward had complete control of the running of his business. This was quite common in Palestine. The master though rich could probably neither read nor write so the management of the estate was in the hands of the steward. But the steward used his position to carry out a policy of theft and pilfering. Word got round to the master and he called the steward to account.

The steward, who was a slave, realized that his dismissal was inevitable and that no one would employ a man who had stolen from his master. So he set out to get what he could from the situation by bribing the master's customers in the hope of getting something in return by involving the customer in his dishonesty. And some of the customers are ready to join in the deception

And here is where we reach the twist in the story because when the master gets to know what is going on, far from condemning the steward, he commends him for his astuteness.

The whole lot of them – master, steward and customers - are a pretty unsavoury bunch, so what are we to make of this story. Clearly Jesus can't expect us to model ourselves on any of them, so what lesson are we to draw.

Firstly Jesus observes that *"the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light"* What he is saying is that if we Christians put as much thought, energy and determination into our Christianity as worldly people do into their business affairs we would make an infinitely better job of our Christianity.

We may ask ourselves "how much time and enthusiasm do we give to our work, our hobbies, our sports, our outside interests, and how much in comparison do we give to our religion. How much of our day is spent in pleasure and amusement and how much in prayer and reading God's word.

The first purpose of the parable, then, is to remind us that the keenness with which we pursue our material objectives is so much greater than that devoted to our spiritual ones. What we need to do is to develop and to witness to a new enthusiasm for our faith.

But Jesus goes on to teach further lessons.

Luke 16:9 verse 9 of our Bible passage reads: *And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the*

eternal homes.

I have to say that I found this very puzzling so I looked it up in another translation which makes much more sense

I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when money is a thing of the past you may be received into an eternal home.

This teaching is about our attitude to possessions and money and there are three possible attitudes we may take

We may regard money as an Enemy.

We may refuse to have anything to do with it. That is what the monks and hermits of the desert did. They regarded all material things as being so soiled and tainted that no Christian people could handle them at all. That is obviously a wrong attitude because if it were universally adopted the whole structure of life would break down. The hermits depended on the charity of others but if all had been like them the result would have been a world of beggars with no one left from whom nothing could be begged

We may regard money as a Master

That is to say we are the slave of money. This is the case of the person whose only desire is to make money and he doesn't care how he gets it. This is a society in which when we ask "What is a man worth?" we mean "How much money has he got?" And this, I'm afraid, is all too often the attitude of today's society and it has resulted in the financial and social problems we have experienced in the last few years, We do well to remember that when we are thinking and planning how to get money that money may cost too much

We may regard money as a Friend.

That is to say we may use our money to establish our own life and the life of the society in which we live. It is a society in which Goods and money are neither hoarded nor squandered but shared and used for the betterment of all mankind.

If we would use material things wisely we will neither worship them nor despise them but use them to bring beauty and comfort to our own lives and to the lives of others

So what this parable teaches us is that both in spiritual and material things we need to get our priorities right.

The steward in the story knew exactly what he wanted – money, comfort and security – and he went all out to get it.

Have we anything like that definiteness of aim in the service of Christ? Isn't there a danger of the Church getting side-tracked into non-essentials? – frittering away on secondary things the time and strength that ought to be given to one thing that justifies our existence – the bringing of men and women into a saving relationship to God in Jesus Christ.

During his current visit the Pope has spoken of the need to resist the aggressive forms of secularism which threaten to undermine our country's Christian foundations.

In the words of the Scottish minister James Stewart: - "We are not a debating club for the discussion of anything that happens to be topical; we are not a device for the multiplication of meetings and procedures. We are the community of Christ, charged with one commission – the winning of the world for God."

It's a reminder that we, the people of the light need to be wide awake, to seek a spirit of

adventure. It's completely wrong to suggest that when a man comes to Jesus he needs to leave his imagination at home. We need to seek new experiences, new ways of expressing our faith.

Above all, we need to pray - "Let that mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus."

And this means, in the words of the letter to the Hebrews (chapter 12, vv 1-2):-
Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Amen