

Sunday 22nd September

Amos 8:4-7

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

Sometimes we see the true mettle of someone by the way they behave in a crisis. At the scene of an accident, if there is a fire, if someone slips and falls in the street. Or something more personal. Whatever it may be. The way they think, the way they act and speak says a lot about them.

And here in this strange gospel reading we have the manager facing a crisis. He has been accused of being dishonest, of cheating his boss. He is about to be dismissed – and getting another job will prove very difficult. What will he do. How will he respond in the crisis?

He's only ever worked in an office, never worked on a building site or a farm. Would he be forced to beg for a living? How was he going to keep body and soul together, to carry on living in the lifestyle he had become accustomed to?

And he comes up with a plan. He sees a way out of the crisis. And this is where the story gets confusing for us because we don't really understand what the culture was, what the norms were for business and commerce, and what options there were for him.

So lets take a step back for a moment and try to see what exactly is going on here.

First some background - remember that charging interest on money was against Jewish law as laid down in the Old Testament. But most money lenders and business people needed to charge interest to make a living – so they found ways round it. Commodity lending. Nothing in the letter of the law against charging 'interest' on commodities – so that's what they did. And we can see no reason to believe that this rich man was any different.

So the manager is being chastised by his master for being dishonest, while the master is playing fast and loose with the rules himself.

Anyway, back to the manager's predicament and what he does.

It would be a fair assumption that what he does is reduce the debt to the principal borrowed – in other words he writes off the interest charge so that all the debtors will be happy and pay up quickly while the offer is on the table. And, as a side, the debtors would look favourably on the manager – perhaps he could even secure a job for the future. .

So the hundred jugs of olive oil become 50; the hundred containers of wheat become 80. The debtors are over the moon – and repay immediately. The manager suddenly has new friends – those whose debts he has reduced. His master, of course, loses out – but he can do nothing about it. After all, if he kicked up a fuss the charging of interest would be out in the open and his reputation sullied. All the time it was hidden he was OK. It seems to be the perfect solution . All the master could do was grudgingly admire the manager for what he had done.

So that's the story. But why does Jesus tell it, and what can we hope to learn from it.

Surely he cannot be commending the manager's dishonesty or incompetence, nor the master's charging of interest.

I think he's saying something like this.

The manager knew how to make friends for when his luck and money ran out, The people whose debts he let off would surely want to help him.

He used 'dishonest wealth' or (old translations) mammon to buy friendship and ensure his future security. He was shrewd. Even his boss recognised that – though he didn't want to have anything to do with his shrewdness.

The manager knew how the world worked, and did the things he had to do to make it work for him. Did what he had to do with his master's money

So what's its meaning for us?

Remember that in these parables Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God. About the rule of God in peoples hearts. About submitting ourselves to God and living the way he wants us to, the way that was demonstrated by Jesus' example.

So how does the kingdom work?

We have been entrusted with possessions, gifts, abilities etc. Either we can hang on to them and squander them – want those possessions, that money etc for ourselves – to hoard them or to use them for our own pleasure. And the trouble with this is that it leads to greed and the temptation to do anything that needs to be done – honest or dishonest – to gain more.

Or we can throw caution to the wind and be generous.

Sell your possessions and give the money to the poor says Jesus – and perhaps that's the interpretation Jesus wants us to take. Don't think of ourselves, think of others; think of God and what he would want. Don't follow the way of the world, follow the new way of the Kingdom that Jesus was teaching and showing.

If we do that we 'make friends' with God – who is on the side of the poor and the needy and the destitute.

The choice then is between serving God – being generous, thinking of others etc; or serving 'mammon' or wealth. Accumulating wealth for ourselves – hoarding; greed; selfishness.

And today the message is as relevant as ever.

Reading the words from the prophet Amos that we had as the OT reading we might be forgiven for thinking they were written this last week – not close on 3000 years ago and 3000 miles away.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
⁵saying, 'When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?

We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practise deceit with false balances,
⁶buying the poor for silver

and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'

Oppressing the poor, exploiting those who have no power and no resource, cheating and abusing. All sounds too familiar.

The world in which we live. No lets bring things closer to home. The country in which we live is a country where there are huge differentials between rich and poor, huge injustices in the system that keep the poor where they are and allow the rich to enjoy life. I think it would be a fair assumption to say that its these inequalities and the inherent unfairness in the way we are organised that has led to the whole Brexit mess. Led to people not trusting politicians or experts, because all they seem to do is make the poor worse off.

The Pope has said

Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Free market economics has created a tyranny in which people are valued only by their ability to consume.

And a sobering statistic I read recently – the 26 richest people in the world 'own' the same amount of resources as the poorest 50% of the world's population (3.8 billion people). A year ago it was the richest 43 people. The rich really are getting richer and the poor poorer.

Surely none of us can see that this is a just and fair situation.

But what can we do.

Campaign; think about what we buy and consume; think about where it comes from and who is paid what. Fair trade where the grower or supplier is given fair wage and not exploited.

This may well cost us more – but surely we can afford that. Otherwise all we are doing is saying my wealth is more important than that person's survival.

Perhaps we need to question the whole system that governs our world. Capitalism seems to have led to this and to the pressure on the world's limited resources. The fate of the poor is linked, I feel, with the fate of the planet.

And of course we can pray. Paul urges Timothy to pray for leaders. And we can surely do that too. Political leaders, business leaders all leaders.

Jesus finishes with these words

'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, ^[d] who will entrust to you the true riches?

When we look around can we honestly say that we – and remember we are part of this world, this nation and this community – can we say that we have been faithful and wise with the world's resources?