

## St Bene't's sermon 18/09/10

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### The parable of the unjust steward

**Text: Luke 16.1-13**

#### Introduction

This morning I'm going to break my rule of many years: to avoid preaching on the parables. But there comes a time when all dubious resolutions need to be broken, so this morning I'm going to do just that - tackle the parable that Luke alone records for us - traditionally known as the parable of the unjust steward.

Why do I evade the parables? Two main reasons. The first is that they're too familiar. Unlike the book of Obadiah they come up again and again - in the lectionary, in the daily readings, and at every other All Age service. I've heard them so many times that I've lost count, and I'm bored of them. Or at least bored of simply hearing them retold.

For the second reason is that I find them extraordinarily difficult. Yes, they're read and praised and performed endlessly - but have you noticed how little people actually go on to ask why Jesus told them? They are surely more than simply bits of helpful moral and practical advice:

when you lose a coin or a sheep you may well find it if you look for it

be nice to people on the side of the road who have been robbed

And as for that dishonest steward ... hmm. The fourth century Roman emperor Julian was convinced that this parable proved that Jesus was not a worthy man. But he makes the same mistake as many do - that the parables are simple moral tales.

What are they then? The more I try and work out what they are about, the more difficult I find it - the parables are baffling, confusing; elusive, allusive; incredibly varied, impossible to pin down. Some people seem to think that parts of the Old Testament are more challenging. But I'm not one of them. Give me Leviticus any day! The latest authoritative survey by Klyne Snodgrass (what a great name!) sets out no fewer than 16 interpretations. He is, of course, being selective!

#### Interpreting a parable

Yet although I don't think we'll ever exhaust the parables, all interpretations are not equal. Indeed, many of them are unlikely for reasons that can be clearly understood

- some interpretations import ideas not in the parable (for example, that the rich man is a bad person)

- some interpretations work with ingenious and unnecessary ideas about the repayment of loans (I'll save you the complexities)

- and some interpretations exclude Jesus' own comment on its meaning

That last one, it seems to me, is a very foolish thing to do; rather, it's the best place to start:

16:8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; (and here is Jesus' explanation) for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

The parable and this comment point to two crucial truths that underlie this parable - that are as relevant now as they ever were:

#### 1. Now is the time of crisis

Jesus comes proclaiming that the kingdom of God has drawn near. God is about to act in judgement, and men and women must respond now, before it is too late. Now is the present age, an age of darkness. Soon, very soon, God will bring in the age to come, the age of light that will only be enjoyed by the children of light.

This parable is one of many that is structured by this coming crisis. For the steward, the crisis is his dismissal, the final judgement of the master (who is an image of God the judge). Jesus commends the steward for acting in the light of that imminent event. For us, we are faced with a similar time of crisis. But our fate is bound up with how we respond to Jesus - a response that must be immediate, decisive and comprehensive.

You may be wondering whether 2000 years of waiting has somewhat dulled the edge of this teaching. By no means!

- for we continue to await the second coming of Christ, a crisis which could come at any moment (this is what we affirm each week in the creed, when we say that 'he will

come in glory to judge the living and the dead')

- but the crisis might come for us even sooner. This morning or this week may bring us face to face with a lesser or greater catastrophe - and you will know when and what this is. What are we to do: the parable warns us: turn to Christ and be saved, or capitulate to events and our own weaknesses, and drown. Like the steward would if he hadn't acted.

## 2. Shrewdness is vital

The parables are not allegories or fables, they are analogies or metaphors. Only certain features of them are meant to be significant for the life of faith. What is being commended is not the behaviour of the manager (who is clearly labelled as dishonest or unrighteous). It is his shrewdness that Jesus suggests his disciples learn from.

The word itself describes an important human characteristic that is inherently ambivalent. It refers to a cleverness or practical wisdom that can be used both for good or ill. It is the nature of the serpent that tempts Eve (crafty), yet also of Solomon (who is wise and shrewd). The new head of Barclays is evidently a shrewd man, and we hope that the Chancellor the Exchequer is shrewd and knows what he's doing.

Is the fact that this parable refers to money and possessions significant? An influential interpretive trend has been to say no: Matthew Henry comments 'This unjust steward is to us ... an example for our attention in spiritual things.'

Unfortunately I'm not at all sure this is right. Jesus has more teaching about the use of wealth and money than practically anything else. Snodgrass (389) suggests that 'use of possessions is a revelation of one's true self.' In preparing this sermon that suggestion became for me an increasingly pointed and embarrassing truth. I'm not at all sure I like what that tells me about myself.

For Jesus the shrewd use of wealth and possessions meant a full awareness of the coming judgement of God. How should this transform the way we use our possessions? He appeals shrewdly to our self-interest, but

a self-interest that is aware that we shall be held to account for all we do.

In the church I often think there are two kinds of people: visionary prophets, and shrewd pragmatics. Those who have their eye on the age to come, and those who realize they need to live in the present age. Those who dare to dream of great things, and those who serve God shrewdly and 'realistically'. Each of them has favourite parables, and getting them to live and work together for the kingdom of God is generally not easy.

Intriguingly Jesus is neither one nor the other; or rather he is both visionary and pragmatic. He is pragmatic in taking money and wealth seriously. He is visionary in emphasizing that the coming crisis must profoundly affect our attitude to possessions. As the sayings after the parable emphasize, money will not last, and wealth is a terrible god, giving neither health or happiness and certainly not eternal life. Despite all protestations to the contrary in our materialist and capitalist society.

## Conclusion

I gave two reasons why I try and avoid parables. There is a third: the parables are narratives that are uncomfortable and potentially life-changing. This parable invites us to consider how far we live our lives in the light of the coming of Christ, and whether we are making shrewd use of our possessions in the light of that truth.

May God grant us grace to walk this day and always as wise and faithful children of light.

Amen.