Sermon for 25th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: 1Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13.

i

This passage from Luke is a real stinker! You start reading through the parable of the Dishonest Steward and you think you know where it is heading and what point it is making, and then wham! – verse 9 hits you in which the steward is praised for his dishonesty. What on earth is the message here?

Look at any Bible commentary and you will quickly discover that everybody has struggled to make sense of this parable; so it is with due warning I now offer my attempt!

A parable about a Master and his Steward/Servant or Slave is invariably about God and Israel. We deduce from this that Israel has failed in its duties; for the owner is clearly so disturbed by the reports he hears of his steward’s wasteful behaviour that he dismisses the steward on the spot.

Bearing in mind the interpretative level of the parable, in what way has Israel been wasting God’s valuables? What are God’s valuables?

Casting an eye on the surrounding parables, it appears God’s valuables are God’s lost children, represented by the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7), the lost or Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) or the excluded poor in The Rich Man and Lazarus parable (Luke 16:19-31).

The stewards of God’s kingdom have been entrusted with other valuables – primarily the Law, the temple and the Promised Land. Yet Israel has misused these also to the point of wasting God’s most precious valuables – God’s lost children. Such is the behaviour of God’s stewards they are acting in opposition to their Master’s intention.

Israel’s elite families have used the temple as a cash-cow and turned it into a den of thieves, according to Jesus, as well as taking God further and further out of reach of the people, imprisoned in the Holy of Holies.

They have applied the Law in a forensically literal way and placed an impossible burden upon the people’s shoulders, even using it to keep people out of God’s kingdom on numerous technical grounds.

The land they have turned into an idol; the Zealot party wanted to cleanse the physical land of Palestine of Roman presence.

These actions are not what the Master has expected of his steward. God does not want Israel to act this way.

As we have seen in recent weeks, Jesus has come to redefine the faith; his redefinition includes a new, spiritualised interpretation of the Law, the temple, and the Promised Land. Jesus, the Son, has come to show the true intentions of the Master. Jesus has come to appoint new stewards of God’s riches.

Jesus has redefined the Law to be: love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself (Mark 12: 29-30).

Jesus has redefined the temple by replacing it with his body, so that where two or three meet, Jesus would be in the midst of them (John 2:21; Matthew 18:20).

Jesus has redefined the land also in to a spiritual concept; the kingdom of God is to be found on no map, but in the hearts of those who believe (Luke 17:21).

This helps us tackle those intriguing verses, 8 and 9 in the parable.

In the parable the steward is commended for his foresight in slashing the debts owed by the master’s customers, so that the steward will have new friends for when he has lost his employment.

The commentators who delve into matters of interest payments being rescinded or whether the steward is foregoing his own commission may be missing the point. Surely the main point is driven home in the second half of verse 8:

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

This makes the commendation of the steward’s behaviour *sardonic.*

It makes the master’s comment amount to: “Well, you have to admire the man; he certainly knows how to look after himself.” This means the master doesn’t necessarily approve of what the steward has done, but admires his shrewd foresight in buying himself future favours.

This also makes sense of verse 9, which reads:

…use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

In other words, Christians who are planning on going to heaven should use their worldly wealth with the same foresight as those who plan only for this world, such as the dishonest steward.

Clearly, the ways those planning to be “welcomed to eternal dwellings” are to conduct themselves in this world will be very different from those who are without such heavenly ambition. **Consistency between present behaviour and future expectations is what the parable is about.**

This in turn makes sense of verses 10-13.

If believers are not good stewards of “unrighteous mammon”, which is “very little” worth compared to the greater worth of heavenly riches, how can those who prove dishonest with the very little worth of worldly wealth be entrusted with the far greater worth of “true riches” – or heavenly riches?

If you think you can misuse worldly riches and still be granted heavenly riches – you are mistaken.

The same point in made by St Paul in Romans 6:1-2:

Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Finally, it also allows us to see the meaning of verses 12 and 13:

And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

All earthly wealth, since we cannot take it with us, is lent to us for a season, as Wesley puts it in his commentary on this passage, and therefore belongs to God. We must use worldly wealth in accordance with the wishes of the ultimate owner, which is God.

Only by acting consistently with God’s true wishes in this life with the temporary treasures of this world, shall we be given that which once given, shall be ours forever, heaven. The following parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus reinforces this point.

Trying to live according to worldly standards and live in the hope of heavenly riches amounts to trying to serve two masters – God and mammon – and that is not just inconsistent – but impossible (v13).

ii

We can see one of the first ramifications of the sort of teaching we find in Luke 16 in Pauls *First Letter to Timothy.*

In the same way as we see the Christians in Jerusalem able to simply hand over ancestral land to the Church in Acts 5, relinquishing a sacred duty to hold the land of their forefathers, we see in 1 Timothy 2, the ability to pray for and be loyal to earthly kings and emperors, without compromising their loyalty to God.

The Christian engagement with this world has been transformed. Essentially, Christians have a spiritualised understanding of temple, Law and Promised Land – the latter not only allowing the giving of land to the Church, but also enabling the Christian community to avoid the war against Rome which the Jews, those who still held to a literal understanding at least, fought and lost.

Now there are no barriers for God’s lost or prodigal children to find their way home; there is no oppressive Law, there is no court of the Gentiles, or Court of women, there is no patch of dirt to defend from foreign infiltration – for now the Gospel proclaims that:

There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men…(1 Tim 2:5-6).

This is the new way Christians are called to interact with the world. Behaviour in life must be consistent with the life we hope to gain in heaven with Christ. Those who hold that this life is all that there is are certainly not slow to live in exactly that way. Can we Christians be as consistent with our belief?

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