

## Trinity 17 Readings of Luke 16 v.1-13

When we come to read the bible we usually come with a definite 'posture'. We address ourselves to the text not as a generalised reader but as a particular reader with a context, a raft of presuppositions, perceptions, hopes and expectations to do both with our own life and the text we are approaching. We have interests, and a desire for the text to affirm our interests. If we are not careful, subconsciously at least, we will be asking the text to confirm our outlook on the world. In this way of viewing the reading of the bible, there is no such thing as a disinterested reader. If this is the case, the corollary is that in order that we *shouldn't be* either knowingly or unknowingly manipulating the text, there may be something to be said for coming clean and naming our posture vis a vis the text – who we come as!! And in connection with today's passage about the so-called dishonest manager, we might come as an entrepreneur, when in all likelihood we'd be cheering the manager on as he masterminds the best discount sale in the bible; or we might come as a rich person or a privileged person, with the strong probability of seeking to champion the right of the rich man in the story to investigate his manager and achieve good order and prosperity on the estate. Or, we might come as a small farmer or estate worker whose interests might be to see the dismantling of the system we live under, welcoming any initiative to that end. Alternatively we might come as a social commentator or a casual observer or a theological observer, in each case uncommitted to the text in any other way than through objective interest; in which case, the text is likely to remain closed to us.

My thought here is that if we come without any sense of who we are and what baggage and interests we are bringing to the encounter with scripture, we shouldn't be surprised if the encounter may leave us a little cold – because without the awareness and commitment of a position, we may be asking little of it, and are likely to receive little – apart from a mild warm glow of instinctual pleasure. So can I recommend that in connection

with this story we take up a position, and see what we see or hear or glean as a result.

The manager in the story stands accused of at least mismanagement, of “squandering the property”. He then gets called to account by the rich man who we take to be the estate owner. The charge of mismanagement, however, is based only on hearsay. “What is this that I hear about you?” says the owner. Then, before the manager has opened his mouth in defence, the rich man fires him, “give me an account of your management for *you cannot be my manager any longer*”. Something is going on here. It is possible that accusations have been brought and the rich man has an open mind as to their veracity. Yet he is firing the manager without any evidence. Does he have a hidden agenda, we might ask? Is he using the best opportunity he has ever had to get rid of this person? Has he himself set the manager up, to catch him out? One thing we begin to notice is that he appears to be free to say anything he wants and suffer no consequences. This is of course a characteristic of the privileged – to be able to do what they want, or change their minds, without changing their ways; we will remember the furore when the banks went down, and then suddenly re-emerged unscathed. We could say that a corporate decision was taken that retaining an effective banking system was of paramount importance, so there had to be an immediate rescue. Alternatively, we witnessed a powerful group reinventing themselves seamlessly – as powerful people, interests and organisations do, with astonishing ease!... because they have people, systems and structures around them to support what they do and who they are. I was interested to read that Archbishop Justin delivered another critique of the banks in a Lord’s debate this week saying, “we need a definitive change of culture... banks should not be content with being privileged but should have a service mentality... and show self-restraint”. Also this week he appealed for more money for his CUF (Church Urban Fund) Mustard Seed Appeal in support of the Just Finance Foundation to expand its programme of establishing

credit unions and offering debt advice. The mighty are brought down only with great ingenuity and perseverance.

Back with the manager before the rich man, there is surely a play in the text on who is in the dock! Is it the manager, or is it the rich man? If we take a look around in Luke's gospel we know that being rich is what the theologians call an 'unstable' category. It is liable to be critiqued, questioned and investigated within the text. And so we find in Luke's gospel that the rich, far from being gold-plated or insulated from the causes of their actions, all come under heavy scrutiny. The rich fool doesn't get to keep his accumulated wealth – and out goes a warning to the man in the story who asks Jesus to help him gain his inheritance. In the story of Dives and Lazarus, Dives gets no reprieve even when he pleads in the afterlife for his family. The rich young man finds that his religion (all these laws have I kept from my youth) is of no use to him in front of Jesus, and when he goes away sad, he goes away as the only person in the gospels who doesn't do what Jesus asks! As for Zacchaeus, the only way he gets to keep any of his wealth is after a massive re-distribution of assets. So when we come to the rich man in this story we should be ready for at least some sort of critique. And it's from this perspective that we might want to consider that he may be acting oppressively, cynically and arbitrarily.

If we hold this thought, we have to acknowledge that the manager gets at least the chance to make amends. What we don't know is whether the rich man is really creating an opportunity for the manager to hoist himself by his own petard, or a genuine opportunity to prove himself. Either way, he gets the opportunity to go to his master's debtors and achieve some liquidity. And he does so, and very skilfully.... But what about the debtors? If we take up the story from their perspective, one question is, 'are we viewing them as people owing money or goods deceitfully acquired, or that they have stolen? Are they wilful debtors, cheats and swindlers? Are they ones who've received a CCJ (County Court Judgement) in the past

legitimately and rightfully? Or, are they the more normal biblical debtors who are unable to meet the unreasonable, even savage, demands of heavy systems of 'taxation' that abounded in the rural economy of Jesus' day? If they are the latter, then we start from the premise that they are victims of both heavy taxation and extortion. If this is so, additional light is shed the character and motivation of the rich man – that he may be seeking to extract from his estate workers unreasonable quantities of produce or unjust tithes. If this is the case, the actions of the manager to lift the burden of debt from these oppressed rural debtors is an act of high gospel value – it is no less than an outworking of the Magnificat – the lifting up of the lowly and the bringing down of the mighty! We may have in front of us, therefore, not only a rather clever entrepreneur, but a champion of the rural poor! If we stay then with our rural debtors, we assume they are delighted to receive their 50% and 20% discounts, and have their burdens lifted. We deduce as well, that these same people are indeed likely to welcome into their homes the man who has saved them from ruin, or even perhaps slavery – for often the only way to pay an unrepayable debt was for one or more family members to be enslaved. This then puts a different complexion on the welcome party – the manager being welcomed in the heavenly places. It is no longer a celebration to which the manager has achieved forced entry. Rather, it has about it something of the character of the great banquet. This is a feast of the kingdom where the uninvited get welcomed and the undeserving find rest and joy – i.e. where the lost are found. And who knows, perhaps the manager was indeed lost and now has been found! Perhaps he had been a swindler and this was his defining moment of conversion! For this is another theme of Luke's gospel – the salvation of the penitent – the thief on the cross, Zacchaeus.... and now the manager perhaps!?

Our parable is undoubtedly thoroughly unstable! It allows us to make many different proposals about the characters in the story. We can hear the story as a story about a very clever entrepreneur. He may be self-serving or he may be just be very good at his job. Around the time of his

annual review he achieves some very visible and commendable sales. He's an asset to the estate! On another reading this is a story about the lifting up of the poor through the skill of the manager. Additionally, it's a story about the bringing down of the mighty! The rich man does not get to accumulate unjust gains. We assume that the 50% and 20% discounts amount to a reasonable deal as opposed to an unreasonable or unjust gain.

As listeners or hearers, in the end we have to decide which voice or voices we are listening to, perhaps on account of whom we have identified with, or in today's exercise, who we've chosen to be. What this exercise does, of course is, to encourage us to consider more closely whose interests we customarily align with or who we most often identify with. If we can reach some clarity on this point, we may then be better placed to consider what message the parables have for us, and what we might be learning about ourselves.

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