

St Botolph's Church Worthing
18 September 2016
Luke 16: 1-13
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'Off you go and fiddle the books and you will be all right'. That is what the Gospel for today (Luke 16.1-13) seems to be saying. It seems an excellent example for a dishonest accountant or manager to follow. This is one of the more difficult of Jesus' parables to understand. For it is a parable, a story to point to some spiritual condition. But, unlike some parables, it should not be treated as an allegory; as suggesting something similar: at least not entirely.

No, Jesus is not suggesting that we should be dishonest like the steward. Jesus is really suggesting that we should use our brains, and follow the Boy Scouts' motto of "Be prepared". A Scout prepares to take care of himself, especially in times of difficulty, just as any sensible and wise person will. Jesus is saying in the story that the scoundrel was a clever scoundrel. He was also a rogue; but he was not a fool.

Faced with a difficult period of judgement, the steward did not pretend that it was not coming. He seized his opportunity to make friends who would look after him when he lost his stewardship. Then Jesus observes that 'the worldly are more astute than the other-worldly in dealing with their own kind' (16.8). The man of the world is nothing if he is not an opportunist. He misses no chance that comes his way to forward his own interests. In comparison, the follower of Jesus, the man of God, enlightened as he claims to be, is often slack and half-hearted about eternal things and is slow to seize the opportunities that arise.

Jesus concludes with a direct application of the parable for ourselves. "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" (16.9). Follow the example of the steward and use the money to good effect. But Jesus is not suggesting, as might seem at first sight to be the case, that we can purchase a place in heaven with money. Money can never really buy friendship; and certainly not God's friendship. What Jesus is telling us, is to use our money wisely, in the service of God and in the service of our fellow men and women: out of gratitude for what God has done for us. Then we will also be commended by God, as the steward's Master commended him. Prudent stewardship of this world's resources is an essential apprenticeship before we can be trusted to be a steward of eternal gifts.

As Jesus says, it is no good waiting until the world tumbles around your ears before making friends. One sometimes sees this happen, but it is usually too late then. It is tempting, especially as the years go by, to restrict oneself to those of similar tastes and inclinations. But this is a way to dried-up spinsterhood or bachelorhood. It can also happen to married couples who spend all their time in each other's company to the almost total exclusion of other people. Then, when one of them leaves, by death or otherwise, the partner is left totally

alone. Make friends of all types, and you will find a richer, more fulfilling sort of life than you thought possible.

One day in the lives of all of us, a crash will come. For many it has come already; for some of you perhaps more than once. Maybe it will be bereavement, or divorce, that leaves us as strangers in a strange land. Maybe it will be a crisis of faith that leaves us wondering whether we believe anything. Maybe it will be a crisis of vocation, when nothing we are doing seems to be worthwhile. Maybe it will be a crisis of emotion, when we do not think it is possible that we can ever love someone closely again. But it will always mean "produce your accounts". Always it will involve our investments; what we have done with what we have been given. For, the crises show up with utter starkness, so many things that we have valued, or indeed not valued. Then we know what really matters, and who are our friends.

Supposing you are flying away on holiday; there is quite a bit of preparation needed. One must get a ticket for the plane and perhaps for a train as well. Maybe to make arrangements for someone to look after the cat, and so on. Then there is accommodation to be booked. If we fail to do any of these things, we may find that instead of going away on holiday we have to stay at home; because there is no room on the train, or the plane, or in the hotel. Only a fool would go unprepared.

That reminds me of the story which you may have heard, of the king and his fool. In medieval times it was traditional for every king to have a fool to make merry in his company, to provide the king with entertainment, and make him laugh with silly ideas. (Nowadays we have politicians to do the same thing for us!) The time came when the king became sick, and his death was near. The fool came to visit him and asked him where he was going. "On a long journey", said the king. "When do you expect to return?" asked the fool. "Never" said the king. "What preparations have you made for the journey?" asked the fool. "None" said the king. The fool was silent for a while and then said, "Here, you take this fool's staff, for you are far more foolish than I".

That leads on to the story of a lady who lived in a great deal of affluence and elegance here on earth, and had everyone running around at her beck and call, treating her servants with great disdain. When her time came to pass through those heavenly gates she did so with a great flourish, sweeping past St Peter without a glance in his direction and demanding to be shown to her quarters. Her guide escorted her up several flights of stairs and down a long corridor into a tiny garret room. The lady was most indignant and complained loudly about the cramped quarters. In reply to her protest she was told: "But madam, we have done our best with the materials that you sent up to us in advance as preparation for your stay here". 'Be prepared' said Jesus, 'not only for what may come to you in life, but also for what may come to you in death. Don't be caught unprepared. Be ready.'

"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" (16.9).

AMEN

Rev Raymond Wood

18.9.16