

22 September 2019

Amos 8.4-7

Luke 16.1-13

I have got into the habit most Sundays of preaching on the bible passages that are set in the lectionary. On the whole I have found it a good discipline. But sometimes it presents you with challenges, because you have to grapple with passages that are not immediately appealing.

And I certainly wouldn't have chosen this gospel passage for this Sunday.

Firstly because it's my first Sunday back from holiday, and I always find my first sermon back from holiday a bit of a chore. It's almost as if I have to get back into the swing of things.

I feel like a footballer at the beginning of a new season, having to get back into the pace of the game.

And this week I am faced with the challenge of this curious parable of the dishonest steward.

It is a parable that is notoriously difficult to understand – not least because Jesus seems to present the story of a rogue as some kind of model for the way to behave for the followers of Jesus.

I'd prefer to have this match a few games into the season.

But that's not the only problem for me. There is the added problem that this passage is all about money and wealth. On the whole I think that Sally and I live fairly modestly – although certainly very comfortably. But our extravagance for the year is probably what we spend on a holiday.

And so it is slightly uncomfortable to have to come back and wrestle with a passage which addresses head on our attitude towards wealth and possessions.

So what are we meant to do with this curious story?

Let me just remind you what the story is.

It is the story of a rich absentee landlord who left his estate in the hands of a steward while he was away looking after other estates that he owned. The steward's job was to look after all of his affairs.

It was a highly trusted position, and one that gave the steward high social status, a great deal of responsibility, and plenty of opportunity to build up his own wealth.

But this steward abused his trust. He squandered the rich owner's wealth that had been entrusted to him. The implication is that he began to live the good life on the back of his master's fortune.

But he was caught out, and the master asked him to give an account for himself.

He panics, because he can only see his own future spiralling into a nosedive.

He has to do something! Above all he has to come out of this situation with some friendships in tact.

He realises that until he is sacked, he can still speak and act on behalf of his master.

So he approaches all of the people who have debts with his master, and gets them to re-write the promissory notes that recorded their debts, slashing their debts considerably.

And these are not small debts that we are talking about.

One had a debt of 800 gallons of olive oil – you can do a lot of stir fries with 800 gallons of olive oil.

And the debt is halved! It is equivalent to over a year's wages.

Another has a debt of 1000 bushels of wheat, that is reduced by 200 bushels – again an amount that represents over a year's wages.

It is difficult to tell whether he is carrying on with his fraudulent behaviour here ... but only now in the service of others rather than himself; or whether he is foregoing the part of the debts that he had added on in the first place that would have gone to him rather than his master. Or whether he is getting self-righteous on his master and outing his master for charging extortionate rates of interest.

I have to say that it all feels a bit dodgy though, from the start to the end.

But then, to our surprise, we find that this dishonest manager is commended. He is not commended for his dishonesty, but for his shrewdness in a crisis. And the comment is added:

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

Jesus seems to be saying that there is something about this man's behaviour that displays a kind of wisdom that the 'people of light' haven't yet grasped. Presumably Jesus means by the 'people of light' those who believe that they are living in the light of God.

There is a kind of worldly wisdom in this man's behaviour that manages to outshine the wisdom of people who should know better.

So let's have a closer look at this story to see what Jesus might have been pointing to.

1. He recognised the crisis

The first thing this man does is to recognise that he is in a bit of a bind. He has been caught out. And if he doesn't act pretty quickly his life is going to spiral downwards.

He is brutally honest about his situation.

- he realises that he has become a pen-pusher and would not be able to compete for any of the manual jobs that are out there;
- he also realises that he would not be able to cope with the life of a beggar. He has become too used to the comforts of life and the status he has enjoyed.

He knows he faces a crisis and that he needs to do something.

We are not always very good when it comes to recognising a crisis.

We can see it happening right now with the climate crisis.

All of the science appears to be suggesting to us that radical action needs to be taken.

But most of us are only taking fairly tentative steps towards doing anything about it.

- we do what recycling we can

- we support the move towards renewable energy
- we might have begun to cut down on our consumption of meat and dairy products

Few of us are acting as if there is really a crisis that challenges the ecological future of our planet, and threatens the poorest communities of our world.

Crisis ... what crisis?

Not that we deny the science, but more that we are paralysed and feel powerless.

When it comes to the question of our relationship with God and our relationship with money, we are not always very good with recognising that there is a crisis to be dealt with. That we need to account for where we are.

We can become very blinkered in our faith and miss the fact that there is a crisis at all.

This is the situation that Amos addressed.

The prophet Amos looked around him and he found people who, on the surface appeared to be very serious about their relationship with God. They would be at the temple on all of the feast days. They would say the right words. They would affirm their trust in God and make all of the right sacrifices and offerings.

But Amos then saw these same people eager to get back to their business dealings, and thinking that their worship of God had nothing to say about the way in which they conducted business with each other.

- they would skimp the measures that people were purchasing
- they would use dodgy scales
- they would exploit the poor
- and bulk out the wheat with rubbish

And Amos called them out.

The God that he knew was a God of justice, who had rescued the people from slavery in Egypt and who cared for the poor and supported justice. To be faithful to this God meant being faithful to his ways of justice and integrity in everything that we do.

And Jesus takes this even further. He warns that, if we are not careful, we can end up trying to serve two different masters if we allow our lives to be dominated by our care and concern for wealth.

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (16.13)

We must avoid a disconnect in our lives where we live and act as if our relationship with God only has to do with certain aspects of our lives, and as if God has nothing to say about how we conduct ourselves in our dealings with money and wealth.

The shrewdness of the people of light should be shown in their capacity to see a crisis when it is presented to them.

But we are very good at ignoring the challenge of the gospel and pretending that Jesus didn't really mean the gospel to impinge on every aspect of our lives.

We are caught in that natural reaction of burying our heads in the sand and pretending that there is no crisis, no challenge to be confronted.

Jesus consistently tried to say that there is a real crisis in our lives in the way in which money and possessions have got a hold on us ... and this goes far beyond the question of honesty. It is about the kind of power that money and wealth has over us.

Recognise the crisis!

2. He reassessed his priorities

Because he recognised the crisis, the man in the story then reassessed his priorities.

He realised that he needed to change and to change quickly.

The fascinating thing about the story that Jesus tells is that this is not a simple morality tale. This isn't the story of someone who 'sees the light', turns over a clean sheet, and so is redeemed.

He carries on in his underhand, slightly roguish ways (because that is all he knows). He's an operator. He thinks on his feet. He comes up with a plan B, using the bit of power and influence that he still has left before his inevitable sacking.

What he does do is to recognise that he has to turn his rogueishness onto a different path.

Up until now he had abused his position of trust in order to feather his own pockets. He had frittered away the money and position that had been entrusted to him, presumably to allow him to live beyond his own means and to enjoy a good lifestyle.

But now he had been caught out and he had to think of something else.

What he realised he needed at this moment most was friends. And he had in his grasp the ability to build up a pool of friends. He hadn't yet lost his position. While it would be foolish to embezzle more money from his master in this period, he could use his position to slash the debt of some of his master's debtors, in the hope that they would remember his actions when he hit rock bottom.

The crisis helps him see what's important more clearly. He comes to his senses and realises that life cannot just be about building up the bank balance and having a good time. In the end it's people that matter. Having company. Being welcome in people's homes.

In v 9 Jesus says, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

Now, let's be very clear here – Jesus is not talking about 'buying friends or friendship' – splashing the cash so that other people like you. That kind of friendship only lasts as long as the cash is there.

What Jesus is talking about here is having a total reassessment of our priorities – so that the priority of our lives is about people, and *always* about people, and

where the cares and concerns of people always come first and uppermost – and about creating a society that is based upon friendship and respect for all.

And everything in our lives should serve that end – loving one another, loving neighbour, loving enemies ... including the way in which we hold and use our wealth and our possessions. Everything serving the kingdom purposes of building communities of friendship and respect.

Jesus is effectively saying, 'Look blatantly dishonest people sometimes get this. Why can't you?'

It's not rocket science ... but actually it ends up being incredibly complicated for us, because of the power that money and wealth so easily have on our lives.

In fact in this saying, when Jesus talks about 'worldly wealth' the literal translation of the words is 'dishonest wealth'.

'Use dishonest wealth to gain friends for yourselves.'

So is all wealth dishonest?

Isn't wealth neutral – it depends what we do with it as to whether it is honest or dishonest?

I think that there are two senses in which we can talk about wealth being dishonest.

I think that it is difficult to escape the fact, particularly in the Western world, that all of our wealth has to some extent been built upon the exploitation of others.

I have never owned a slave or been involved in the slave trade. But in this country we cannot ignore the fact that the wealth we now enjoy came as a result of the slave trade generations ago.

I am committed to justice in our world. I would never knowingly be involved in anything that meant that someone was paid a pittance for their work, or forced to live in poverty in order to provide for my comfort. And yet I know full well that the wealth that we enjoy in this country has been built up on just those kind of unjust and exploitative principles.

We need to be honest that there is something tainted about all of our wealth. It is impossible to get away from it.

But the other way in which wealth can be described as dishonest is in the way in which it lures us into thinking that this is where we find value and status. And try as we might, we keep on being hoodwinked by it.

We try to persuade ourselves that we haven't been captured by the appeal of wealth and the apparent security that it gives us ... but its power is extraordinarily subtle.

And we need to be constantly reassessing our priorities.

What are we about – the needs of people, of community, of friendship, of justice, of relationships?

Or are we focussed on the easy security of money and possessions?

3. He took radical action

Once he had reassessed his priorities, he went to work on it.

And he made big, bold moves.

Nothing tentative.

This wasn't just a question of 'Go big or go home'. This was more a question of 'Go big or no home.'

The stakes were high. And so he cancelled debt big time for his master's debtors. These were life-changing amounts of money for those who carried these debts.

Some think that this is the key point of the story, because of all that Jesus has to say about forgiveness and the cancellation of debts.

This man, belatedly, was won round to the principle that life is all about the cancellation of debts and the promise of forgiveness.

And perhaps Jesus is wanting to make a comparison between the extravagant, bold gestures that this dishonest manager makes, and the more timid gestures

that the 'children of light' make in their reassessment of their lives in pursuit of the community of the kingdom.

Someone once described the church rather disparagingly as a 'covenant to niceness'.

As followers of Jesus we are called to a much more radical way of life than simply trying to be nice to one another.

Showing forgiveness, loving enemies, cancelling debts, breaking down barriers between people of different races, genders, classes – all of this calls for radical action that goes way beyond 'being nice'.

Jesus is wanting to shake his listeners out of their complacency.

This rogue understands what it takes!

Recognise the crisis.

Reassess the priorities.

Take radical action.

Serve the kingdom purposes of Jesus in everything that you do and with everything that you have.