

Sermon: Pentecost 17 C

September 23, 2007: Wesley 9.00 & 10.30am: Rev Peter Walker

Luke 16. 1-13

This week the businessman Peter Homles a Court, who is co-owner with Russell Crowe of the South Sydney 'Rabbitohs' rugby league team, announced that he is going to try and see to it that the South Sydney Leagues Club is run without poker machines . Some estimates are that around 50% of the money that passes through the machines are welfare payments. I thought, what a shrewd manager. How unusual to be willing to go against the stream like that; to see that there could well be a different and probably better future if the Club cuts itself free from a practice that leads to disaster for so many.

My Bibles have different titles for the parable we just heard. Some call it the shrewd manager; some call it the dishonest manager. It has been a puzzle to many down the years. Gospel scholars tell us, believe it or not, that its message is not dissimilar to Mr Holmes a Courts plan for his Leagues Club.

Jesus tells a story about how one employee has a whisper in the bosses ear about the manager - saying that he's been fiddling the books. The manager, realizing he's in hot water, and in nice and deep, decides that he is bound to lose his job so he'd be best to try something, anything! to set himself up for a better future once the axe has fallen. He visits the clients to whom his master has made loans and cuts off a goodly portion of their debt, and does so behind the master's back and using the master's chequebook. Then comes the surprising twist in the story -

The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly. (vs 8)

The problem is made worse by what follows in verse nine.

Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone you may be welcomed into the eternal homes.

So is Jesus praising dishonesty? How can we sort all this out? The first thing to do is to understand how the story works.

It looks as though the master in the story had himself been acting in a somewhat under-handed manner. Jews were forbidden to lend money at interest, but many people got round this by making loans 'in kind'. Oil and wheat were easy commodities to use for this purpose. In this way, no one was making money by lending money.

It is likely that what the steward deducted from the bill of those clients he visited while in fear of losing his job was the interest 'in kind' - the "jugs of oil" and "containers of wheat" that the master had been charging. If he reduced the bill in each case to the principal, the simple amount that had been lent, the debtors would be delighted - and that seems to have been the case. But here's the really shrewd part: the master couldn't lay a charge against the steward without owning up to his own shady practices. Thus, when the master heard about it he could only admire the man's clever approach. Therefore, that's the first thing to realize, something Jesus' listeners will have understood.

The second thing to take on board is what this parable is really about. It is a parable and so we know it is not to be taken literally.

If faced with a first century Jewish story about a master and a steward Jesus' audience would know at once who they most likely represent. Notwithstanding some difficulties and differences of opinion, the master is God, the steward is Israel. Israel is supposed to be God's property manager, if you like, the light of God's world. In fulfilment of that calling God had granted them a land to call their own. Israel understood themselves to be set over God's creation as stewards and to be responsible to God for the job they were doing. But Israel has failed the task - and that is very much in focus in the Gospels and we know, through them, in Jesus teaching. There is a real urgency now for the people of God. They are under - to use the image of the parable - the threat of imminent dismissal. What then should Israel do?

Many in Jesus' day were seeing decay and offering their own answers. The Pharisees, who are portrayed as Jesus' regular protagonists, felt that it was time to pull even tighter the regulations of the law. In this way, Israel would be made more holy. Jesus, on the other hand, uses this parable to preach that if Israel is facing a major crisis the answer is to throw caution to the wind and think differently. It may even be time to learn from those who had hitherto thought of as children of the world, rather than the children of the light: to be set free from all the copious restrictions of religion and tradition and learn a new way.

And the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light. (vs 9)

A crisis was coming and 'eternal homes' would be needed. The shrewd or dishonest manager (whichever it was) saw this need, and is praised for his willingness to take the risk of behaving differently. Israel's task is to squander and not to save what has been to them the gift of heaven. This is a consistent drum beat in Jesus preaching and teaching. The hoarding, the saving, the building, the tightening was the problem, not the answer. The future needs to be different.

The third thing to register is that the parable is directed in a very specific way to those who first heard it. It wasn't spoken to us or for us. Our challenge, however, is not only to hear what it meant for them, which is hopefully what we have just done, but also to listen for the word to us within these words of old.

But how can the parable be of use in our day? Obviously it has nothing to do with commending questionable business practices - I can assure you of that. I think there may be two - at least two - ideas for us to take away.

I believe the parable advises us to sit lightly to the extra regulations which we impose on each other and, not least, which we tangle into the life of the Church; the 'taxes' we place, if you like upon the simple principal which is on loan to us from the Master: traditions and expectations and legalisms, spoken and unspoken, which are over and above what is needed for us to take up the relatively simple call to be part of Christ's mission of loving God and loving our neighbour. Much of the tradition helps that mission, but there is much that does not. The church passes through turbulent times and frequently needs to reassess what

matters and what does not matter. Whatever we may think of, say, the spread of the Pentecostal churches they learnt early that people were not going in for traditional religion any more and that it was better to stay loose from old ways and try some new ones. In our different way, perhaps we need to learn from them; learning to think unconventionally, even thinking with the shrewdness, to use Jesus' phrase, of the 'children of this age'.

Secondly, maybe we need to find partners across traditional barriers. It is Social Justice Sunday and we, as the Church of Jesus Christ who stood with the economically poor as well as the spiritually poor, are about the business of social justice. Who else is as well? How can we join with them and become stronger for it? What a great thing it is that we share with Baptists and Anglicans in running the Veranda. What other partnerships can we form?

Peter Holmes a Court believes he can run his Leagues Club without one of the more oppressive practices of modern life, a practice which is essentially a tax on the poor and which, in my opinion, makes any government that profits by it morally bankrupt.

Is a return to the simplicity of the Gospel of Jesus, freed from the too many trappings of religion, and is a new sharing in his willingness to build fellowship with gentiles and tax collectors and "left-over people", the way to build for the church a home that will last? That is the brilliance of parables. The invariably cause you to start asking fresh questions.