

Pentecost 18 – Canberra Central Parish Service – 18th Sept 2016

Reading: Luke 16:1-13 'The parable of the shrewd manager'

Theme: "Use and mis-use of money"

Text: "You cannot serve both God and Money" vs 13c

Introduction

It is great when a plan comes together. Here we are enjoying our worship just before a "Parish Budget Meeting" and the reading of the day is about money. What more appropriate a reading we could barely imagine, until you get into the text! Jesus often talks about money, both in a positive way as well challenging his listeners. In fact Jesus either directly or indirectly talks about money more often than we would think. It appears to be one of his favourite topics.

Today's parable is clearly set in the context in which wealth is of paramount importance. Luke 16 begins with an acknowledgement of a rich man whose manager was accused of 'squandering or wasting' his owner's possessions and is called to give account of his management practices, which seem dubious to say the least.

At the outset we need to be reminded that a parable is a grassroots lesson connecting the ordinariness of life with the extraordinary nature of God. Parables are usually gifts of clear insight into God's choices for our lives. However, this parable is difficult to read, difficult to interpret and even more difficult to preach upon. I, with thousands before me, struggle with this passage and in a sense wonder what Jesus really meant by it!

Some of the understanding comes in the section at the end of this passage, which is not in today's Lectionary reading unfortunately but I include it here:

"The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this, and were sneering at Jesus."

Luke 16:14

Even though I struggle with this parable, let's see what we can make of it and if we can learn a little for ourselves today. At the outset I say, what I share is one interpretation of the parable, however there are many other understandings, and people may happily take a different viewpoint. For me, that is one of the joys of scripture – there are a variety of interpretations and we are called to examine them and grow through these differences rather than allowing them to cause divisions.

Hence, on to the Parable of the shrewd manager - Luke 16:1-13

The parable shows obvious parallels to the story of the prodigal son that immediately precedes it in Luke 15. In both parables a subordinate (child/steward) 'squanders' the goods of a superior (father/rich man) and is, in the end, received back and celebrated/commended. This formal similarity, however, masks very important thematic differences. The steward, unlike the son, is not penitent; and the rich man, unlike the father, does not forgive the squandering but rather commends the steward's shrewdness. As a morality play the prodigal son works well, while the dishonest steward leaves us wondering whether any of the characters should be commended, much less imitated!!

Perhaps the key is that, unlike the prodigal son story and more like the parable of the rich fool from some weeks ago, this parable actually encourages the dissipating of 'mammon' which can be translated as 'dishonest wealth'. Indeed, after being released for squandering the master's money, the steward goes on to squander more. He disseminates his master's investment portfolio in order to protect his own future and secure a 'home' (people will welcome me into their houses) we read in verse 4c.

Like the rich fool in Luke 12: 13-21, he trusts in wealth to shelter his own uncertain future. Through his gifts to his master's debtors, he seeks, not to free them from debt, but rather to indebt them to him in the form of a return gift. Like so many of our own gifts, the gift of the steward disappears in a social network of self-promotion where gift giving functions to situate ourselves as a benefactor to whom a return of gratitude is owed.

The first twist in the story comes when the master does not condemn, but rather praises the steward for these actions. The greater twist though comes when Jesus praises the man and commends our imitation of him in verse 9. But what exactly in the unjust steward are we, the hearers, to imitate? The clue comes in the final phrase of verse 9, "... you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings or eternal homes." Unfortunately the NRSV translation of this final word, '*skenas*' as 'homes' misses the point and covers over a key point of the parable. The shrewd manager is seeking the stability of a home as mentioned in verse 4 and here the word is '*oikos*' in the Greek. What Jesus offers is not a home as in verse 4 but rather '*skenas*' which is better translated as 'tents' here in v9: '...you will be welcomed into eternal tents'. There is no stability in what Jesus offers, rather the abode is that of a wanderer, a refugee and a pilgrim, whose mobility requires the dispossession of goods – getting rid of all the unnecessary baggage and only taking what is really needed.

Perhaps the Jesus who told this parable calls us to dissipate wealth as the steward did, but in order to be disposed of the desire that our gifting produces, we need to see that we also dispose of the illusion that wealth gives us, security and a sense of stability. Only as we are freed by our holy squanderings are we made able to live the pilgrim life of those nomads who have relinquished the possessions that possess them. Another twist in this parable.

Walter Bruggemann notes that one of the central insights of the Gospel is the paradox that 'letting go is to have and keeping is the way to lose.' Let me repeat that: "...one of the central insights of the Gospel is the paradox that 'letting go is to have and keeping is the way to lose.'"

This parable, in a roundabout way, brings us back to this insight and so re-inforces the words of Luke 12:32:

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'

In light of this reading, the call to be 'faithful' in Luke 16:10-12 is precisely the call to have faith in the one who provides - enough faith to relinquish our grip on the wealth we think will protect us in order to receive the 'true riches' of verse 11 along with the 'unfailing treasure in heaven' mentioned in Luke 12:33.

If we read the parable this way, the problem with the unjust steward is not that he 'gifted' his master's debtors (even his master commends him for this), but that his gifting was poisoned by the ulterior motive of receiving something back from those to whom he gave. Jesus encourages his listeners to imitate the man's scattering of wealth, however this is done in order to receive the gift that is beyond return and outside any economy of exchange – an 'eternal' tenting in which one is received not into a settled domain but into a triune life that is eternally on the move. This is God's kingdom.

Conclusion

This interpretation doesn't answer all the peculiarities of this parable but it does suggest to us that in our giving we need to give freely, with 'no strings attached', expecting nothing in return. Such is the love of God for all his people – just may be this is the point Jesus is making through the parable. Hence today as we look at our budget, after morning tea, may we give thanks to God that we can give freely and meet the needs not only of our Parish but also support others locally, in the Presbytery region and wider, both nationally and overseas, expecting nothing in return.

"You cannot serve both God and Money" Jesus reminds us at the end of the set reading for today. (Luke 16:13c)
Amen!!