

Sermon for 18.11.16 Jeremiah 8.18-9.1; Ps 79.1-9; 1 Timothy 2.1-10; Luke 16.1-13

When I was preparing for today's sermon, the first commentary that I opened said of today's gospel parable, "This is notoriously one of the most difficult parables to interpret."

There's nothing like a challenge to start the day.

The root problem in understanding the parable, is the master's commendation of the steward, who is so plainly dishonest.

As we can imagine there is much written about this parable – many theological opinions offered to clarify its meaning.

One viewpoint is that the steward was decisive when faced with a crisis, and so too should Jesus' listeners be – the ones who are wavering in their decision to follow him and his kingdom message.

Another interpretation is that the parable highlights that in Jesus' kingdom of justice and power, masters do not get even – which is why the steward isn't punished.

This view accords with Jesus command to love enemies and his teaching about non retaliation.

And then there is that other hard piece in vs 9 when the disciples are told by Jesus to make friends for themselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

This verse actually highlights the mutuality of the kingdom over and above individual hoarding. For the way of the kingdom is to share material wealth with others, particularly the needy. In this way the wealth is converted into heavenly capital because it benefits the many.

Another commentary suggests that the parable highlights that people are keener about their material than their spiritual welfare, and that some of the acumen they use in business ought to be devoted to the more important matters of eternal life.

The commentary writes that the steward's dishonesty is not what the master upholds. It is his intelligence which his lord commends.

The sayings which follow directly after the parable, give various reflections on the use of material goods, and are collected here by the gospel writer to throw further light on Jesus teaching about the management of worldly affairs.

Further into the week, I left the commentaries on my shelves and found and read a paper that Rowan Williams (the previous Archbishop of Canterbury) presented at a Conference in New York in 2010.¹

¹ <http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/static/pdf/articles/williams.pdf>

Williams begins by saying that it is quite striking that in the gospel parables Jesus more than once uses the world of economics as a framework for the stories – the parables of the talents, the dishonest steward, and the lost coin are examples.

Economics according to Williams is a part of our lives, like other things.

Our money transactions like our family connections and our different labours, bring out features of our human condition that can tell us something of how we might see our own identity, and ourselves in relation to God and to each other.

Williams notes that while monetary exchange is simply one of the things we do, we have however, in our culture, developed an attitude to economic motivations that has taken over and everything else we do has simply become “window dressing.”

He says that over time, a certain language about customer and provider has crept into our daily communication, and consequently, such a language, that we now take as part of our normal communication, threatens to reduce other sorts of discourse to its own terms, which reduces everything to one set of questions all related to money.

So if we accept the reasoning that Rowan Williams makes in his paper, it may well be the case that we are paying much more attention to economics than we know. Consciously or unconsciously.

Awareness is vital here. For as Christians “Indwelling” in one another In the Spirit is the ground for Christian ethics.

We should not be hoodwinked by language, by culture, by anything that will cause us to lose clear sight of God and the way of Christ and our mutual dependence upon God and each other as the foundation and corner stone of our lives.

All the readings today speak about mutual encounter between God and humanity down through the ages.

In the first reading we hear about the personal relationship between the prophet Jeremiah, God and the people.

There is care, concern, compassion and mystery that all fit together.

The psalm today is a communal lament and the psalter in love cries out to God for help for the community.

In the epistle, the stress is upon God’s desire to save every human being.

Every human being is to be included in the intercessory prayers of the community, Paul says, because if God is one, God must be concerned with all peoples not just with this or that group or nation.

There is personal encounter in each of the readings, as always.

They reflect humanity's felt expression of our relationship with God and each other.

It is what makes us human. We are not to be reduced to anything less.

I believe that the parable today reminds us to be aware and to act with intelligence when we are threatened with crisis.

And the crisis in this era – (or one of them) - I believe, is the subtle but effective way of economic infiltration that promotes individual consumerism and self-centred indulgence.

Generosity of heart and sharing, particularly with the needy, is what converts our material wealth to heavenly capital, as the gospel tells us today.

Let us all hold in our heart and go forth today in confidence that this is so, for we have been entrusted with the wealth that never fails.

The Lord be with you.