

Luke 16: 1-13; 1Tim2: 1-7

Chester Cathedral 19.9.10 10am and 11.30am

I don't know how you feel about roller-coasters but we are about to go on one this morning.

There was a rich man...now, how do we feel about the seriously wealthy, bosses of big banks, hedge fund managers, media moguls and the like...people with power and staff who only have to flick their little finger for their wishes to be carried out. Not like us, are they? Live in a different world. Maybe if we are honest we are a teeny weeny bit envious but we are not really on their wavelength, they can look after themselves.

This particular rich man- the one Jesus is talking about- hears an accusation that his manager has been fiddling the books, feathering his own nest. It may be true, it may be a calumny, we're not sure. But the rich man acts decisively, tells his manager to 'Clear his desk and go.' How do we feel about that? That's how the rich and powerful behave, isn't it? The manager has no opportunity to defend himself, to disprove the allegations- that can't be right, surely? We're on the manager's side here- everyone has a right to a fair hearing.

Then we hear the manager considering his position. He doesn't fancy labouring work and he is too proud to claim benefits (he doesn't belong with people like that). Hang on, this is beginning to feel a bit suspect- he seems to have taken on some of his boss's airs and graces. Our sympathy is dented, we begin to reassess this man's character and situation.

Then he comes up with a clever idea. If he reduces the amount the debtors owe the rich man, they will be very grateful to him and he'll become a bit of a hero. Furthermore, if he is successful in organising it before they find out he no longer has the authority to do it, they will praise the rich man for his generosity and it will put the rich man in a double bind. The manager has to act quickly. This is a possible win win situation for him- the only loser is the rich man, and well, he can afford it and probably deserves it. Our wavering sympathies with the manager are restored. We can see that he is a bit of a shady character, not too concerned with moral niceties- not above wheeling and dealing in a tight corner- but we can allow ourselves a moral holiday here- it's a case of getting even, getting our own back on the rich and the powerful, who seem to have it all their own way.

Whoops! so far so good. But...this clever bit of footwork by the manager puts the rich man in a tricky situation. Surely he will be very angry when he discovers, too late, what his ex-manager has been up to. Well, we would be, wouldn't we? No-one likes to be cheated: but -being cast in a bad light isn't attractive either and if he now says to his debtors that it was all a mistake he will be cursed for his meanness and called all the rude names under the sun.

The denouement is unexpected. The rich man praises the dishonest manager because he has acted shrewdly. Now this really is a jolt, a roller coaster swerve. We've got dishonesty and shrewdness yoked together. On one level we expected the rich man to punish his manager, not praise him; but then we have been caught at least

partly condoning his behaviour- identifying with the rogue against the rich.

Roller coaster rides usually leave one feeling decidedly queasy and this is no exception. Was the manager the victim of the rich man's unfeeling and peremptory behaviour? Was the rich man the deserved victim of a clever scoundrel's schemes? How should we consider our own behaviour? Is it right to strike back? Is it OK to 'get even'? What is just and unjust? What is Jesus saying to us?

Jesus digs hard at our attitudes, requiring us to reassess our own moral and spiritual bearings.

Two aspects I want to pick up on, arising from the punch line: 'his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.' Let's be quite clear- Jesus is not saying dishonest behaviour is praiseworthy. He might well be saying that dishonest behaviour is always just that- dishonest- no matter who is the victim. We can tie ourselves in moral knots to justify actions – it's OK to cut a few corners here, claim a bit more on expenses because the business we work for can afford it; it's OK to cheat those who are rich; we can resist paying back tax we owe because it's not our fault. This is all slippery slope stuff and will have spiritual if not worldly consequences.

But the rich man recognises and acknowledges that his errant manager has shown himself to be clever and capable and quick to act, astute in assessing a situation, committed and able to take risks -all qualities which are praiseworthy. And are these qualities which

are in abundant supply among Jesus' disciples- among us here and now?

The children of this world, as Jesus wryly points out, are very committed when it comes to matters of money and power. Huge amounts of time and energy are spent maximising material resources, planning ahead for future needs, building up financial security, and therefore in worldly terms the ability to control events and exercise power. It seems we live in a world where the more you have, the more you need. Commitment- to the gods of money and power –can be observed everywhere.

If only all that energy and commitment were dedicated to serving God, building up the church. One of our biggest problems is our divided loyalties. 'You can't have your cake and eat it', as my mother used to say, irritatingly often, no doubt because I wanted to do just that. It was a long journey before I really understood that we have to choose. God grieves this deep desire in us to hedge our bets. Our spirituality is shaped by what we most desire, and therefore put most effort into. Is it financial security and the good things of life that that opens to us, is it building up a power base, however modest, from which we can exercise control, or sustaining a petty feud, or is it the deepening of our discipleship and a passionate yearning for God? If it is the latter, then we have to accept vulnerability, that 'getting even' is not kingdom behaviour, but that real astuteness and commitment are praiseworthy and to be used in God's service.

The manager uses his gifts for his own self-interest but stumbles into grace. We have the capabilities as followers of Jesus- to heal,

to reconcile, to show God's love and beauty and truth, his grace and mercy and so build up the church.

There is a central action in this story- the act of forgiveness. The manager makes his situation better by forgiving his master's debtors, and the master consequently forgives his manager because of his shrewdness. It is no accident that Luke places this parable immediately after the Prodigal Son. It is the *act* of forgiveness- nothing to do with feelings- the act of forgiveness builds God's kingdom.

We all have mixed feelings to struggle with- ingrained attitudes, deep hurts, dissipated energies, conflicting views about what is justice. But it is this act of forgiveness- God's forgiveness of us and the outworking of forgiveness on all our lives, that draws us into salvation.

There is a wonderful Jewish saying:

Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way, it is still muck.

Why stand brooding here when you can be on your way, stringing pearls for the delight of heaven.

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