

Sermon for Mattins at Harvest Festival, 18th Sept 2016

1 Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13 The Ostensible Authority of the Dishonest Steward

Today is Harvest Festival, as you know. I am under a bit of pressure to keep my sermon nice and short, so that we can go on soon to enjoy the harvest lunch. So here goes.

The lesson from St Luke's Gospel is a lesson about stewardship - although it's rather puzzling. On the face of things, we're looking for teaching from Jesus to support the idea of our being good stewards, good stewards of God's bountiful gifts: so we might think we are like the steward in the story, in the sense that God has entrusted to us his farm, and it's up to us to look after it and make the most of it.

I don't know how realistic that example is today. I think that tenant farmers simply rent land from a landlord, and then they do whatever they want on the land they've rented: either growing arable crops or raising livestock, cows and sheep and goats. This steward, in St Luke, is more of a manager, more of a managing director, put in by the shareholders, by the owner, to run the business successfully.

When I was thinking about this at first, it occurred to me that a parallel which might appear to us might be something to do with the scandal of excessive boardroom pay: that the board members are like the steward, they're the stewards of the shareholders' business: and in rather too many cases, in recent years, they have rewarded themselves even when their performance has not been very good.

But whether you're talking about a farm or a market garden or another type of business, and a manager appointed by the owner to run it for him, whether you're considering that or whether you're thinking of a company with shareholders and a board of directors, you can envisage a situation where whoever is the steward in those circumstances might not do his or her job very successfully or very well.

They might be asked to account, perhaps to the annual general meeting. A shareholder might stand up - as for example they did at the recent BP AGM - in that case to enquire why the board have awarded themselves enormous pay rises, when the DEEPWATER HORIZON oil spill had cost the company over \$50 billion.

It sounds a bit like Jesus' story of the owner asking the steward to explain what he's been doing. It's not clear from the story whether in fact the steward

has been doing a bad job, or whether he's simply being accused by third parties of not doing a very good job.

But for certain he is worried. He's been told that he's going to get the sack. Then we get this very puzzling passage where, on the face of things, we're supposed to applaud the fact that the manager is a cheat, and that he has defrauded his boss up of what he would otherwise have received, in repayment of loans which he had made.

It almost reads like an example from a legal text-book. The manager, acting with 'ostensible authority', reduced the amounts shown as owed to his principal by various debtors. He wasn't authorised to do that, by his principal, by his boss; but so far as the debtors were concerned, he had ostensible - apparent - authority from the owner to act on the owner's behalf.

So, in English law, the deductions, the write-offs, would stand. But then you get this extraordinary passage where the boss finds out what his manager has been doing, and instead of firing him on the spot for gross misconduct, he is supposed to have applauded him for being very shrewd.

It's dog-eat-dog out there, and perhaps you're a bigger dog than the other one. The worldly wealth that the steward is not looking after properly is described in the passage as 'unrighteous mammon', dishonest wealth. I think that the right translation is the one that we had read out: unrighteous. 'Unrighteous' in the Bible means sinful; it means something that separates us from God.

So the idea is that worldly wealth, unrighteous mammon, is unrighteous because it tempts us away from proper respect for God. If you go shopping instead of going to church, clearly it means more to you to go shopping than to come to worship. It's not righteous.

Still, it seems odd that the master, the landlord, should praise the dishonest steward for being worldly wise, for being shrewd in a very dishonest way. Certainly by the end of the passage it's quite clear that the sort of values that we would expect Jesus to uphold are indeed the ones that he puts forward. If you are honest in a little, you are going to be trusted with a lot. If you're dishonest when you get tried out with a small amount, then nobody will go on and try you with big and responsible deals.

It comes in the middle of a passage, where Jesus, as he does so often, turns things upside-down. Just before in Luke's Gospel is the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the brother left behind protests, in a way which we can sympathise with. He says, 'Look: you know, I've been a good boy. I've done all the right things. I've stayed at home and taken care of things for you. But

nevertheless, when he, my tearaway brother, came back, you killed the fatted calf for him. Jesus seems to be rewarding bad behaviour there too.

But is it the same with the Dishonest Steward? Is he, like the Prodigal Son allowed into the Kingdom of Heaven and eternally pardoned? We don't know. What happens to the dishonest steward? There isn't necessarily any forgiveness in the story for him, just praise, praise for getting away with it.

Perhaps Jesus is pointing out that, if all you have is worldly standards, you can get away with what would otherwise look like very immoral results.

Are we good stewards? Are we operating on the worldly standard or the heavenly, and is there a fatal conflict of interest between the two? Jesus doesn't give us easy answers.

What is the 'mammon'? Is there a good mammon or a bad mammon? Is it always bad? If mammon is the wealth of the land, the fruits of the labours of the farmers, the husbandmen, is it 'unrighteous mammon'?

There must be a sense in which some mammon is good, is worthwhile, because without some wealth, without some worldly wealth, people can't be fed and clothed and housed: so there must in fact be some righteous mammon out there. Jesus is taking exception to the unrighteous mammon, although it does look as though he thinks that it's possible to wink at outrageous behaviour, if it is actually good mammon, if it bolsters the success of the enterprise. Debt relief is sometimes a good thing, after all.

It's quite a long way from 'We plough the fields and scatter'. Next time I go to an AGM, and am inclined to say something about the fat-cats on the board, I think I may have to be more circumspect. Things are not always what they seem.

Amen.

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