

## 18 September 2016: Luke 16 1-13

They say about adverts that if you don't understand them, then they are not meant for you. Well today, I admit that I don't understand all of our gospel reading, but I do think it's for us, so we'll need to do a bit of detective work together.

The summary is reasonably clear: you cannot serve both God and mammon.

This part of Luke's gospel is a collection of sayings addressed to different people. They are brought together here, because they share the same themes, although the audiences are often very different: sometimes tax collectors and sinners, sometimes the Pharisees and sometimes the disciples. So the words we read take on a slightly different meaning, according to who is being addressed. This part is apparently directed towards us, as Jesus' disciples and we are told you cannot serve both God and mammon.

The word mammon is a Hebrew word. Luke changed the Hebrew letters into Greek letters and we now have the word mammon, in English letters, because is no other, similar word to be found in either Greek or English. The nearest equivalent to mammon is the phrase *'that in which one trusts'*.

So one theme, which we have returned to over several weeks, is what do we put our trust in?

This passage is partly a warning about idolatry; don't put your heart in material security, because the only true security is God's love. That's what the man who stores up his wealth in barns learns, in Luke 12, and also what the prodigal son learns, in Luke 15. But what about the dishonest manager in today's reading?

Here we have a man who is fiddling the accounts. He slices off some of the master's profit for his own gain. We don't know what he does with the money, but we do know that the master hears about it and sacks him. The manager realises he is now in a bit of a fix and he has a clever idea. Before he leaves, he reduces the amount everyone owes. He gives some people a fifty percent reduction, others a twenty percent and so on. The surprise for us is that the master sees what he is doing and commends him as shrewd. There follows a very obscure set of phrases, where Jesus appears to commend being shrewd with dishonest wealth, in order to show our fitness to manage the riches of eternal life.

The first bit of this is easier to understand. The manager is probably reducing his commission to make the debt smaller. That way, everyone owes a bit less and he can call in favours from them afterwards, when he has no work. And he treats people according to their situation; some get a generous reduction, others get a smaller reduction. It's a clever idea, because he understands that if you look after others, they will look after you.

But the next bit of the passage sounds quite odd. Jesus seems to say that if you are faithful with dishonest wealth, then you can be trusted with the goods of the kingdom. I looked up several commentaries, none of which are very helpful on this passage, and one even uses the word 'enigmatic', which is a polite way of saying they didn't really understand it either. Another commentary suggests that the original meaning has been lost in translation.

One issue here is how we read the Bible and we need to remember that there are different ways of reading it. Some people read the words then look at the original Greek text, to make sense of it in Greek. The phrase 'being faithful with dishonest wealth' might have a different meaning in the original biblical Greek, but we already know this has been lost. We could ask how readers in first century Palestine understood this passage. Unfortunately, we don't know whether the phrase had a very local meaning for them, so again we are not much further forward. A third alternative is to ask what it means for us now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What could 'faithfulness with dishonest wealth, for the sake of the riches of the kingdom' mean for us?

I am going to suggest one idea for us today. This passage is about faithfulness and about people who don't live their lives well. The manager is dishonest, gets found out and does something to rectify his situation, which the master recognises is wise for someone in bad circumstances. I don't think Jesus meant to commend people for being wise with corrupt money, but one theme running all the way through Luke 12-15 is about people who are lost and people who are found by God, or people who re-find their way back to God.

All of us do things we regret from time to time. We aspire to live a Christian life then do things that fall short, sometimes quite a long way short, of what we aim for. Faith is not about all the times when we manage the Christian life well. Faith is about how we pick ourselves up from a wrong place and get back on the right path, because we have faith that God will forgive us and renew us. The one thing that marks our faith as unique, is that we worship a God who loves to forgive us and welcome us home.

Over and over, Jesus says he is not here for the self-righteous, but for those who know their need of God's love and God's forgiveness. In reality, we are all bankrupt before God and we all need God to renew us, day by day, to make us fit for God's service.

I think what is being talked about here, with the parable of the dishonest manager, is that when we go wrong, we can still be faithful; we can pick ourselves up, go back to God and carry on. We receive riches in the life to come, because we have faith in God's forgiveness of our bankrupt state in this life. This is what we celebrate when we take communion that are forgiven and renewed, day by day, despite ourselves, because of God's generous love.

So we cannot serve both God and mammon, because faith in God is the only kind of faith that truly leads to a new life.

**Amen.**

**NvF**