

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’

So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?”

No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

REFLECTION 1:

JESUS’ AMAZING GRACE

We are faced today with the strangest parable that Jesus ever told. It begins with a rich man who was calling in his manager and accusing him of fraud. The accusation was obviously true as the manager immediately went to work planning his next move. He was between a rock and a hard place and he knew it. In a matter of days, he would be out on the street with no way to make a living, so his obvious question was, ‘What shall I do?’ Digging ditches was not a viable option. He was either too weak or too lazy to do that. Anyway, such common labour would not suffice to sustain him in the lifestyle to which he was accustomed. Begging was also dismissed, he was too proud to do that. Then his scheming mind hit on an idea. He would make his master’s debtors indebted to him and his method for doing that was to discount their bills. So, one by one he called them in and made his deals – his discounts ranged from twenty to fifty percent and by the time he was all over he had them in his pocket! They now owed him big time. Now, when he needed help, all he had to do was to call in those debts. ‘Jack’, he might say, ‘do you remember that time I saved you ten grand? Well, I am in a bit of a tight spot, so no doubt you would be willing to make a small donation to my relief fund’.

After that everything is left up in the air – nothing is settled. When the rich man heard about this second scheme, he was impressed. It had cost him a bomb on top of what the manager had already stolen. But still, he was impressed, and even gave the manager credit for his being enterprising. End of story. We are not even told whether the manager was actually fired. What a mess! It sounds like something we heard about recently in the news!

The church has always been troubled about this parable and well it might be. The whole thing is rather confusing. Justice is never served, and theft goes unpunished. A conman is commended. Greed and selfishness are paramount. Did this really come from the lips of Jesus? However, the story's audaciousness is evidence of its authenticity. We may as well accept it and deal with it, as it is, sleaziness and all. Unlike the old black and white cowboy movies there's no quick way of identifying the heroes and villains; the heroes wearing white Stetsons and the villains black caps.

Jesus saw life as it really is, and he did not hesitate to tell the truth about it. Everything in this story is tainted. There is not one clear villain or one clear victim anywhere on the scene and that troubles us. We like for things to be simpler than that. We want someone to cheer and someone to jeer, someone to blame and someone to support. But often, these people can be found only in fiction. Not many of them are walking around in the real world. Jesus saw things as they really are and called a spade a spade. But the most confusing thing of all is Jesus' graciousness. John Newton called it 'Amazing Grace' and indeed it is. If Jesus knew us so well, why would he care enough to die for us? To that question the Gospel gives one answer: 'There is no greater love than this – to lay down one's life for one's friends'. But love itself is confusing – the why of it, the how of it, the extent of it. We cannot explain it, but only receive it. Jesus looks upon all our wheeling and dealing that nailed him to the cross and we expect him to judge us for our sins – instead he saves us with his grace.

REFLECTION 2: A MASTERPIECE OF CUNNING

Jesus uses stories to trick his listeners into new patterns of thinking. The Gospel parable today seems to jump out from our daily newspapers or is highlighted on our TV screens - 'MANAGER DISMISSED FOR FRAUD', 'ACCOUNTS FALSIFIED', 'TICKETS FORGERY'. It might seem that Jesus speaks of our time and not of the second century.

The goings-on of the steward are commonplace, but what is disturbing is the commendation he receives. We would expect Jesus to vigorously denounce swindling, but he refrains. Rather, Jesus deliberately sets the scene to expose an unexpected message - 'observe the astuteness and the enterprise of the children of this world'. They secure their future without delay - would that the followers of Jesus might also use the same ingenuity in providing for their future with God.

Let's focus on the steward, is he guilty as charged, that he squandered his Master's property? Most likely he is, but he wastes no time in justifying himself, neither does he suffer the illusion that he can find employment elsewhere. He faces the charge of instant dismissal. He muses to himself that he is now unfit for manual labour and the thought of going begging horrifies him.

The steward now comes out with an acceptable solution. He approaches his Master's debtors one by one - he tears up their invoices and issues them with fresh ones for a much lesser amount. In so doing he has his debtors think that they are recipients of a special favour from him. He also engages in a form of blackmail in case they complain - they have already agreed to his arrangement!

The steward loses his commission in lowering the accounts, but reckons it is better than losing everything. In reality it is his master who pays the price of the transaction. He can only be impressed - a masterpiece of cunning! The point of the parable is not the dishonesty and bad faith of the crook - the Gospels condemn all forms of dishonesty. The keynote is the resourcefulness of the steward faced with failure and poverty. Would that the Children of Light (that's us!) be as decisive and resourceful in

securing our future, not with amassing wealth but by laying up treasure in the Kingdom! This Parable teaches us how to use material goods wisely when faced with an imminent crisis such as sudden death and the Last Judgement. Jesus did not opt for safety or security or a long life and those of us who wish to be his disciples are challenged to follow his example in risk-taking for the sake of God's reign.