

Sunday 19 September 2010: Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Unjust Steward

Readings: 1 Timothy 2.1-7; Luke 16.1-13

Well, I suppose I ought to find it encouraging to find myself with one of the hardest parables of the New Testament on a day when the Pope is in town, and more domestically on the day when we start our Living the Questions Course. Jesus, in the Parables, seems intent on prising open our assumptions long enough - with his teasing, surprising 'surely not' stories - to allow for the possibility of a real change of heart, mind, will. He makes us work, and he doesn't let us settle into one certain answer - and we have to keep returning to the story in new contexts which provoke new understandings.

So we shouldn't be surprised that there are lots of different interpretations of this story - of the unjust steward - and I find myself looking at the one which makes some sense of the events of the Pope's visit to the UK.

Just as theatre or film or literature asks us to 'suspend disbelief' at the play acting in order that we can access truth which is easier to see because it is at one remove, so Jesus' parables challenge our sense of right and wrong so that we can start to see where we have laid down the lines with too much certainty, leaving parts of the big picture truth of the Kingdom of God out of view. The parables provoke us to live afresh by faith and not by our own comfortable certainties.

So what are the certainties punctured by this particular parable?

What we have is a steward first of all who appears to confuse his role with that of his boss. The accusation is that he's been squandering his boss's resources. Interesting word that, squandering. It's the same word we've had used of the Prodigal Son, in the previous chapter, squandering his Father's inheritance. But it's worse in a way - these are not his resources to squander, not his legal inheritance.

To whom is Jesus addressing his story? - his disciples. The very people he is entrusting with becoming stewards of his spiritual message.

'Give me an accounting of your management, for you cannot be my manager any longer.' The unjust steward is called to account - he's sacked. It won't work any more. Under pressure of facing this unpalatable and inconvenient truth he takes stock of his position. What's going to happen to him now?

As it stands it's not as if the people he's being collecting rents from are going to welcome him with open arms - he has after all been charging them extortionate and crippling sums of money. Is that so he can make his cut? Is it because the landowner has insisted? Well, whatever the reason he takes the radical step of slashing the amounts - knocking a few noughts off the invoices - to sizes people can afford to pay so that they can be freed from their debt.

'What a shrewd move,' is the master's response. And the word shrewd is the word we get 'prudence' from, the word so beloved of Gordon Brown when he was chancellor and prime minister. Prudent in this case because by slashing the debt he is putting himself back in the good books of all these people, whose help and hospitality he will need if he is not strong

enough to dig and too ashamed to beg. Prudent because he is creating a scenario that when the master returns to collect his money he finds himself greeted like a hero for transforming their lives and releasing them from oppression – when before I suspect he would have greeted with joyless deference and suppressed resentment.

What's the master to do? Say the deal's off, it's all a scam, you're as you were with the debts – make himself three times as unpopular as before and possibly cause a riot? – or go with the flow and accept his new role as Mr Popular. I know which one I'd go for – and I think I might give the steward his job back while I'm at it.

So what is this story about? Well, the most blindingly obvious reading is that it's about forgiveness. And it really must be blindingly obvious if you look at the bulk of interpretations in the tradition. It is even more blindingly obvious if we remember that it comes in the gospel of Luke, right after the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost Son. It comes in the gospel whose version of the Lord's prayer literally says 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive our debtors' – directly confusing and equating our spiritual forgiveness with the way we handle economic debtors. It's as though Jesus is saying, and I'm quoting here, 'FORGIVE. Forgive it all. Forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, or for no reason at all.'

You may not find it within you to forgive from the heart, but ultimately, unforgiveness is like a poison which stays with the person in whose power forgiveness lies. That may not seem fair, it may seem like adding insult to injury, but it's true.

I find myself compelled to seek to understand what this parable has to say to us in the light of yesterday's events when the terrible history of sexual abuse within the Catholic church was brought right into the harsh daylight of public life through the Protest the Pope march which came through Trafalgar Square and right into the spiritual heart of the Catholic institution through the Pope's words about it in the context of his homily at Westminster Cathedral where he brought this issue to the cross. A homily followed by the most profound and extended silence by the whole congregation. A silence I understood to involve a reconnecting, with compassion and shame, with the truth of the situation for the victims and a bringing it to the place of justice, forgiveness and healing.

The question remains from the voice of Protest the Pope, 'When will the church acknowledge that this issue did not just happen but was systematically covered up and therefore allowed to go on to protect the institution of the church rather than the victims?' There is more to acknowledge for forgiveness to happen, they're saying. The steward needs to recognise his own injustice further.

I find myself wrestling with this injunction to forgive when I remember going to a course run by Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse – a largely Catholic organisation, as a curate in an inner city church where at one point I reckoned that at least one in eight of the core congregation had spoken of sexual abuse in their experience. Most of those in family contexts.

The leader of that course, herself a survivor, would repeatedly say, 'Don't tell survivors to forgive.' Before you forgive you have to have got to the place where you can feel the anger and the outrage which comes from some kind of sense and self rather than just the shame and the guilt. Never tell a survivor they have to forgive.

‘For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light.’ This is Jesus’ punchline to the parable. He wants us to think about how this parable works in our generation. Does this interpretation, this call to forgive, cut it in our own generation?

Watching the astonishing fanfare and the singing of ‘Tu es Petrus’ which greeted the arrival of the Pope in the Cathedral yesterday, I could not help remember how the Pope is understood – the descendant of Peter, given authority for the binding and loosing of sins. An authority on which his role is founded. An authority which he has been taking on this trip and in his ministry to call the secular west back to a commitment to truth in the face of moral relativism.

And I heard the Pope remind the people of their priestly vocation. I put this together with the reminder I had reading Lucy Winkett’s article in the Tablet about what she would say if she had five minutes with the Pope. She took the opportunity to talk about the ordination of women, and to remember that for a lot of women there has to be a process of finding themselves in feeling and knowing their dignity and self-worth and belovedness, a true sense of self, before they can lose themselves for the sake of the gospel. Of course this is not just true for many women, it is true for survivors of sexual abuse. It is why it is so hard for them to forgive.

But here’s the thing. This passage assumes that ALL have the authority to forgive – an authority which comes from being God’s steward, Jesus’ or part of a priestly people. The steward is not condemned for forgiving what under strict accounting is not his to forgive. He is commended. The priest and the bishop are to represent the authority given to forgive for the people, not take it away from the people. And the authority given is to forgive, not to take God’s accounting into our own hands.

So, for the survivors of sexual abuse, the radical hope in this story is that there can be a process of discovering their own agency, their own authority – a place from which to forgive. It is a slow and painful one, involving a process of healing significantly accelerated when those involved in committing the sin admit it. And we will know when that authority has been discovered and when healing has been found when it is possible for the sins to be forgiven.

This is also a parable about being forgiven. The two always go hand in hand in the gospel. It is a parable which reasserts some key principles in Luke’s understanding of the divine economy. There’s bad squandering, for which like the Prodigal we have to come in repentance and hope that God will squander his love rather than call us to account. But there’s also good squandering, such as when the shepherd squanders the 99 to go in search of the one lost sheep, or when the sower squanders the seed on all sorts of unpromising as well as promising ground. This good squandering, or generosity or grace, is the hallmark of divine economics.

We have to leave the accounting to God to do in such a way that avoids it becoming a hoarding of resentment or a stockpiling of treasure out of the reach of those who need it. We need to understand that the commodity of ‘unrighteous mammon’ of money as personal insurance policy in a world of fear and lack needs to be transformed into the good gift of God’s abundance, which if squandered appropriately can begin to reconnect the rich with the poor, the victims and the perpetrators in a just and joyful community.