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Pentecost 18

Luke 16: 1-13

“When is being dishonourable not dishonourable.”

Rev. Helen Paget

To be honest, I have always found today's gospel a little disturbing. I mean it appears that Jesus is commending the dishonest slave as honourable for being even more dishonest by getting his masters debtors to 'fiddle their books' so that their debt is reduced. I mean, just how is that honourable?

Sometimes we have been tempted to explain how this dishonourable manager is honourable, or at least slightly honourable by suggesting that the amount he was taking off the debtor's bills was just his overinflated 'commission' so the only person to really lose money was him. But I am not sure that is really what is happening here, after all, if the manager were really charging up to 50% commission, then the debtors would have run to the landowner very quickly to complain. So I would like to suggest a different way of reading today's gospel, where we take the parable pretty much as it is. In Jesus time, agriculture was the heart of the economy, the main issues were who controlled the land and what it produced and who had the power to take the surplus. Landowners employed stewards or managers to oversee the agricultural production of the land. Debtors paid the landowner in produce: olive oil or wheat or, very occasionally, in money. There were three types of people who rented property from landowners, those who paid a percentage of their crop; those who paid a fixed amount in produce; those who paid with money. Today's parable appears to relate to those in the second group. The steward or manager is entitled to a commission on that rent, but he is also liable for any losses he causes his master. So the manager in today's story is indeed very lucky that the only penalty he suffers is being dismissed, he could have been imprisoned or at best fined. Whilst the manager may well have been surprised by the mercy offered him by the master, he nonetheless decides to act quickly before the renters get wind of what has happened to him, so he calls them all and tells them to quickly alter their debts. He infers he is acting on the masters instructions, on a 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink'; 'I'll give you a break if you give me one too'; basis.

Now when the master discovers what has occurred he finds himself in a bit of a bind. To overrule the actions of the manager, while he is perfectly within his rights to do so, would leave the debtors thinking badly of him and damage his reputation as a landowner, to allow the reductions to stand, while costing him some significant produce, leaves his 'honour' intact and his reputation as a kind and fair landowner would spread widely. People will be praising the landowner for being generous and noble.

So what is the message in this parable for us today, in our western affluent 21st century lifestyle.

Even the shady characters of society have their redeeming features; this manager was sharing his good fortune. He had been given a break by the master, he had received grace, he was not

required to repay what he had embezzled, nor was he imprisoned, and in return he gave the debtors a break in reducing what they owed the master. To quote a semi-recent movie, he 'paid it forward'; he showed others the grace he had been shown. This manager shaped his future by his present day actions. He saw potential in offering goodness to others because the master had offered him goodness. This shrewd manager forgives, at least in part, the debts of others. No questions, no assurances of right behaviour, just straight out debt forgiven. Sound familiar? Forgive us our debts as we forgive others.

God offers us grace on a daily basis. Unearned, undeserved, but offered freely. What do we do? Do we see this grace, grab it and keep it just for ourselves? Or do we accept the grace, and offer grace to others in a similar way. God does not wait for us to be perfect, or to promise never to stray again before offering us grace. We are not required to 'from this day forward' never stray from the right path again. Yes, it is God's hope that we will always try to remain on that path, but God knows it is not possible to say categorically that we will never again leave it. But it doesn't matter, grace is offered anyway, and will continue to be offered. All that is required is for us to receive it.

But we can also offer others grace, we can 'pay it forward'. In the same way as we are offered undeserved grace, we can offer grace to others. We can offer forgiveness to those who have upset or wronged us, even if they haven't asked for it. Because, in today's parable there is no mention of the manager asking for a break, or even asking for forgiveness, the master sees the embezzlement, calls him to account and offers grace immediately. It can be hard for us to offer forgiveness, and sometimes the hardest person to forgive is yourself.

Today's gospel comes in the middle of a number of parables about the lost and found, lost coins, lost sheep, lost sons (prodigal son), and it is followed by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. All of these parables follow a similar pattern, oops, yuk, aha, yeah. The manager was discovered to be embezzling, oops; he was dismissed from his job, yuk; he decided to offer mercy to his master's debtors so they would show mercy to him, aha; the master commends him for his actions, yeah. Jesus was trying to show that God is willing to search for everyone, not just those with the right pedigree, not just those who cover themselves in sackcloth and ashes. God is even ready to search for those who are not looking to be found, for those who, for the time being anyway, are quite happy with their lives. Grace is always there waiting, we just have to be ready to see it and accept it. But we also are called to offer grace to others in the same way as God offers it to us.

Our gospel today ends with a saying most of us are familiar with. You cannot serve two masters, you cannot serve God and money, or wealth, or

For me this is an indication of where our priorities are in life, and where they should be. If our whole existence, like the manager's, is on what we can get out of life, how much we can make, how much fame or reputation we can make for ourselves, then our lives become a treadmill we often cannot escape or a noose around our necks which may eventually pull us under. But if we are able to see our priority in life as that path or role or thing which God is calling us to, then money or fame or reputation may also come our way, but they are not the

reason we are doing what we are doing, simply a side effect or benefit. Techno guru Bill Gates and financier Warren Buffett may be two of the worlds' richest men, but they, and others, are also two of the most generous, they have joined a 150yr philanthropic tradition where America's most wealthy are encouraged to give to the poor. Both these men have pledged unprecedented sums in an effort to address world poverty. These men could just 'sit back and watch their empires grow', but they have agreed that their good fortune can be good fortune for others as well. Their foundation will be able to spend \$3billion per year in their efforts to attack global poverty and disease. They are 'paying forward' their good fortune. I don't think any of us are in their league, but it doesn't and shouldn't stop us 'paying forward' to others the good fortune we have from God. In a material way we can share with others what life offers us. So too the grace we offer others can be freely given, just like the grace we receive from God which is given freely.