



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Amos 8:4-7
Epistle 1 Timothy 2:1-8
Gospel Luke 16:1-13

Of today's Gospel reading, the British commentator G.B. Caird writes: "The parable of the dishonest steward bristles with difficulties which have given rise to a great variety of conjectural explanations." Indeed, most authorities I consulted opened their commentary with words to that effect. And it is easy to see why.

The story itself doesn't present much of a problem – a steward (or 'manager' as our NIV version would have it) finds himself between a rock and a hard place, and manages by dint of his wit to extricate himself quite nicely. The problem arises when Jesus comments on the story in verses 8 and 9: *"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."* Just how acute the problem really is isn't that apparent in the version we've just heard: what appears as 'worldly wealth' in our NIV version (ο μαμωνας της αδικιας) is more accurately rendered in the KJV as "mammon of unrighteousness" or, as the NRSV has it, "dishonest wealth." Jesus is telling us to make use of ill-gotten gains to make friends for

ourselves, even if, apparently, we have to cheat the boss to do so. Naturally, commentators do their utmost to try to avoid that reading, but it isn't easy!

Part of the problem, I believe, lies in the traditional approach to parables, which sees them first and foremost as allegory. In an allegory, each character 'represents' a specific notion or person, and as a rule, in most parables, the character of 'master' (κυριος) is taken to represent God. In this instance however, this approach is tricky, since it is the master who 'commends' the dishonest act. It is this that causes the embarrassment. Commentators point out that the Master is essentially merciful. He gives the dishonest manager a chance to make up for his sin, and that in the end he forgives the manager as the manager has himself forgiven the master's debtors. So far, so good. But this still leaves verse 9, where it is Jesus Himself who tells us to use Mammon to gain friends for ourselves. This is generally explained away as a case of irony or perhaps the ever-useful category of "Semitic hyperbole", but this strikes me as somewhat weak. The tone of the parable, as they interpret it, just doesn't support a sudden switch to an ironic mode, and in any case - even though our translators try their best to make it disappear -

the word *Mammon* just won't go away - Luke even repeats it in verse 13.

But there are other ways to approach this parable. More modern schools of interpretation start by treating the parable as a simple, earthy story with a point, one that reflects the historical setting and the experiences of the people Jesus was addressing. Once this has been done, then perhaps "roles" can be assigned to the characters, but that is secondary. In the case of this particular parable, at least, this approach appears to me more promising, chiefly, I think, because it allows us to take the master on his own terms so to speak, and not start out by assigning him the role of God.

Once he is relieved of the burden of this role, the whole feel of the parable changes. There is no longer any reason to try to justify everything he says or does. We are free, then, focus on the fact that the word translated here

as “was accused” (διαβληθη in Greek) is from the same root as διάβολος, or ‘devil’ – i.e. ‘false accuser’ the implication being that the manager is fired on the basis of gossip and false rumors. This puts the master in a rather bad light. Other details of the story can also be examined on their own merits, with interesting results. The amounts owed by the debtors, for example, according to experts in early Mediterranean economies, suggest that we are dealing with a very important ‘master’ indeed, one with vast holdings; the fact that the debtors themselves can write suggests that they are not poor tenant farmers, which traditional commentators tend to assume, but rather wealthy, educated merchants – in other words, these are big-time business deals involving big-time players. We also discover that at the time it was not unusual for big wheeler dealers in the Jewish world, to disguise interest charges (which were, of course, forbidden by the Torah) by including them in the sum that appeared on whatever document sealed the transaction. Many commentators then conclude, that it is the impious interest that the steward is deducting from the accounts, not amounts actually owed.

In this scenario, then, we have a hired manager or steward unjustly fired by a fickle and essentially dishonest landlord, who puts things right for himself by allowing the debtors to wipe out the interest on their loans. The landlord isn’t going to make a fuss about this, since that would reveal his impiety – in fact, since the debtors have no reason to know that the manager was on his way out, they will naturally assume that he is acting in his master’s name, and all the credit for piety will go to the master – so, in the end, everyone comes out winning – even the master who at least gets the principle back and a reputation for piety to boot. In this light, it is easier to take Jesus’ comment in verse 9 as essentially ironical, since the tone of the parable is ironical throughout.

I find this approach to an interpretation of this parable more satisfying for several reasons, not least of which is that it allows Jesus some humor – it is precisely that understated humor that supports an ironical reading of verse

9. It also allows us, as disciples, to identify to some extent with the «dishonest» servant – who now appears not to be so dishonest after all. This is something I think the hearer/reader naturally does anyway, we always tend to root for the guy in trouble, and it seems plausible to me that in its original setting, the hearers, who would have seen the steward as an average fellow trying, like them to eke out a living, caught up in the intrigues of the rich and famous of the time, the powerful landlords and ruthless merchants: they, too, would have applauded his shrewdness.

This reading leads to an interpretation that might be seen as a commentary or expansion on what Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew 10:16: *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves”*.

The word “shrewd” (φρόνιμος) is, significantly, common to both. Jesus knows full well the nature of the world into which He is sending us – that it is ruled by Mammon and populated by predatory wolves. He has, in the gospel readings over the last few weeks, gone to great pains to remind us of the risks and demands of discipleship. It seems to me that here, then, He is offering a bit of relief – He knows we will often find ourselves caught up in the struggles of the powers of this world and suggests that even in the direst straits we can act in a way that not only benefits us, but also the very wolves that threaten us, because in an odd sort of way, this reading preserves the «message» of the allegorical approach we saw earlier: that forgiving one’s debtors is always a good idea, it always bears fruit. He also, I think, reminds us, albeit indirectly, that a little humor always helps.