

Pentecost 17
19/9/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1
Psalm 79:1 - 9
1 Timothy 2:1 - 7
Luke 16:1 – 13

On being reliable in stewards of the things that matter: the mysteries of God

Jesus' parable of the rogue manager is one of those stories people are apt to think should not be in the New Testament. The problem is not that the rogue manager is a disreputable character, because Jesus is often found in such company. The problem is that Jesus appears to condone his dishonest behaviour and encourages his audience to follow his example, which creates an awkward situation for bible-believing Christians intent on living a virtuous life. Perhaps this is the reason the story has generated an excessive amount of scholarly commentary, which makes it possible for sermon writers to drown in endless, detailed reading and still not discover the preachable point of the story.

Every story in the New Testament is a story of faith left to us for a purpose, however puzzling that may seem. And every story is a small fragment of a much bigger story put together by the author of the Gospel, who is also working against the background of broad biblical themes. The thing to do is to discover how this fragment sits in context with the themes that Luke has built up, rather than get fixated on "the problem".

This story it is not about dishonesty, nor is dishonesty the problem it seeks to address. The starting point is with the idea of an absent master who is coming to call his servants to account. In the Gospels this is a reference, which means we are meant to think about God, who has entrusted certain things to his people and what it would mean for them to be ready for the great crisis, when the Kingdom comes and God calls us all to account. When in our reading the master commended the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly, it does not condone the dishonesty, it approves his readiness to act in the face of being called to account for his stewardship of his master's resources, and this is used as an analogy for the life of faith.

The real issue here is the question of our attitude towards those things that are entrusted to us by another. If we focus on the apparent dishonesty of the manager there are some interesting byways to go down, such as the thought that his reduction of the bills only amounted to giving up the commission he would have received, and did not amount to robbing his master at all. But the starting point of the story is that before he cut the price in order to gain friends for himself and provide for his future, the man had been insulting his master's trust by squandering his wealth, which earned him a dismissal.

The challenge of the story as far as faith is concerned is: how are we disposed towards the riches entrusted to us? Will we be faithful managers of the things that really matter: the gifts of God? Will we use what we have been given to make friends for ourselves in the world, or will we do things that will make friends for God? The man was praised for acting in a way that meant he had friends in the world, but the underlying issue was: if that is how the children of darkness act - people who have their eyes fixed only on the material realities of this age - how should the children of light act – those who are stewards of the mysteries of God? What we are talking about here is the challenge of our time for people of faith. It will call for us to access all our powers of imagination to steward the riches of God in such a way that it consolidates our friendship, and the friendship of others, with God.

Following the parable are a few verses of teaching, which are probably early commentary on Jesus' story. They serve to underline the idea that there is a link between the how we regard what has been entrusted to us, and the way we go about life in the world. "Whoever is faithful in a little will be faithful in much"... "If you have not been faithful in what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?" [6:10, 12] And above all, "No one can be a slave of two masters, it is impossible to serve God and wealth". [6:13]

The last line has always been a challenge for the church. Some, like St Francis and St Anthony, gave up all their wealth to serve God. Henry VIII stripped the monasteries of their wealth because the product of centuries of holding "all things in common" had resulted in a huge accumulation of wealth and power that competed with royal authority.

Some months ago a Parish Mission rather like us came to the attention of a Property Developer. The Parish Mission has an interesting set of inner city properties worth several million dollars. The developer decided he had a good idea for redeveloping the property and offered the Parish Mission double their value, no doubt thinking acceptance was inevitable. The small congregation had been working hard on developing its mission and refused the offer, preferring to get on with the job it saw itself as called to do. Some church officials were outraged that a handful of people could make such a decision, claiming that bigger issues were at stake and the resources could have been employed more effectively in other ways. One person said that if the wider church had gained access to those resources it would have overcome our money problems, another said congregations are sitting on lakes of money. But you "cannot serve God and money" and a decision was made for mission, not money.

Luke likes to talk about the relationship between the gospel and the rich and the poor. "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God"[6:20] and "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" [6:24]. The poor have no special merit, but they do include the economically poor. Luke likes them because they are also "the poor in spirit" – their lack of material wealth means they are more readily people who long for God and earnestly seek God's presence. Luke sees real dangers for the rich: the consolation of their wealth is such that they are more likely to believe in their self-sufficiency, rather than place their trust in God.

Individually we are rich people, and collectively as a congregation we are amongst the top 4 or 5 most wealthy in Victoria. People think about the resources we have in the same way as they did about the Parish Mission mentioned earlier. How are we disposed towards our wealth? What does our attitude tell us about what we think of God? Do we see our wealth as “ours” to do with as we please, or is it simply a tool, a resource, a means to a greater end? Does “you cannot serve God and money” mean we should sell up and give it all away? Or do we see this resource as a means to enhance the distribution of the real riches that come to us through the mercy of God?

Whatever plan we choose for the future life of this site, we are not running a private club here for comfortable people. If we are going to be at worship, we must be at mission, and if we are going to be at mission we must be at worship, for we believe in God-with-us, the Word that became flesh, the Word that becomes enfleshed in the mission of the disciples today. I said disciples, because we are disciples and the critical centre of the New Testament message is not focused on our solidarity and struggle with the poor, but with our attitude to the presence of Christ, the one who became poor for our sake who blessed the poor, and invites us to enter the cross shaped pattern of his life. It is that pattern which defines what is poor and what is rich, and it is this alone that has the power to join the dots and make sense of all that we do here. Furthermore, this is the proper basis – the only real basis we have - for making friends with the world about us.
