

Pentecost 18
18/9/2016

Mark the Evangelist

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

The dishonesty of God

The gospel reading we've just heard presents us, at first, with a troubling parable. The story of the parable itself is fine, and one we could well imagine such a thing happening. The troubling part is that Jesus commends for our consideration the behaviour of the man dismissed for squandering his master's property, who then continues to do the wrong thing.

There is a fairly straightforward explanation of why Jesus might use such an illustration but, because it is straightforward, I'll not go into it this morning. Instead, let's consider a much less straightforward reading which side-steps our concerns about Jesus' morals and, if less straightforward, is nevertheless much, much more interesting.

Consider this little syllogistic turn of thought: if, according to Jesus, we are to be as the dishonest steward was, and if, according to other New Testament preachers, we are to be as Jesus himself was, then the dishonest steward is, in fact, Jesus himself.

So let's see whether this interesting thought can be sustained, keeping in mind that here we are dealing with a parable. As a parable it is intended to suggest or evoke, and to break open new thought. It is not a strict allegory, and so not every element in the story can be correlated to some particular thing in the world or in the ministry of Jesus.

Consider again the basic scenario. The relationship between the steward and the master has changed in such a way that the steward is to be sent away. No longer being able to claim the security the master would normally have been for him, the steward is required, so to speak, to make his own way in the world.¹ He does this by becoming a liberating presence for those around him, who are also subject to this master. For the one who owes on 100 pots of oil, the debt is reduced to 50 pots; for the one who owes on 100 baskets of grain the debt is reduced to 80. By lightening the load of those who owe not the steward himself but the master, the dishonest steward earns himself a welcome into the homes of those he relieves, and so earns also the commendation of the master.

Is this not the work of Jesus, humbled and sent into the world in order to serve humankind for the relief their "debt" to the "master"? This is scarcely a perfect fit with the parable, but it will do. And this forced interpretation is warranted by virtue of the purpose of preaching itself – the very act we're now engaging in as speaker and hearers.

It is our natural tendency when reading such passages as today's to make them about ourselves. This is quite understandable, for on the surface the parable plainly is about us and what we do with the resources we have. But if that is all we hear then we waste our time in the reading and the preaching. There are no shortage of voices today crying out about what we should and shouldn't be doing with our money. In an age in which the economy is God and economists the priests, everything is touched by fiscal concern. We

¹ ..."being on the form of God, he did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped but humbled himself..."

don't need gospel readings to suggest to us to be wary of the dangers of too much or too little attention to our property and wealth.

But to hear the gospel – as distinct from hearing economic and moral law – is to review our actions in the light of the actions of God in Jesus. It is this divine work which informs our work. We might say that it is only if God himself has found a place in our lives by means of so-called “dishonest wealth” that it becomes meaningful to say that we might find ourselves welcomed into the “eternal homes” by means of our dealings with the same “dishonest wealth”: God working “dishonestly”, that we might too. If we hear the parable only as a word about how we ourselves should behave, we will be tempted to imagine that we are to buy our way into God's life such that, if we give away enough of what we have, we might then be assured that God will reward us. Yet, we will usually think the price too high – or we simply will not know what the price is and so what to bid. We will then experience the word of God as a mere demand on us and the things we have or desire.

But if Jesus is the dishonest steward in the parable, and we are the ones whose burdens are reduced, then the parable is not merely about our buying a way into God's favour, but about God having greatly, and graciously – even “dishonestly” – lowered the prices.

Whatever the parable itself might seem to be about, then, the point of preaching the parable as gospel is to draw us into the sphere of what God has done. What God has done and what we are to do, then, become one thing. As God opens heaven for us by making it “affordable”, so are we to find a welcome in the “eternal homes” by doing likewise.

And a word about these “eternal homes” will be the last thing we say here.

Heaven is another one of those “most useless words” in the life of the church. I won't attempt to rank this useless word in relation to the other useless words we've noted in the past (including “religion”, “spirit” and “god”), but perhaps we could sharpen the point by noting that “heaven”, as a religious idea, is more misleading or even dangerous than it is useless.

It is misleading because it instantly fills our heads with images of a place and a time which is not here and now. And yet, God's kingdom comes and God's will is done in the very worldly location of Jesus of Nazareth. The dishonest steward does all of his work in the world. To see Jesus, making his way in the world, is to see heaven. Here-and-Now is the possibility of the heavenly act, the possibility of catching a glimpse of heaven.

Perhaps even more importantly than that – and to move from the gospel of God's work with dishonest wealth to our becoming God-like in that way: now is the time to learn to recognize heaven as something which has to do with very worldly realities.

What are we to do with what Jesus calls “dishonest wealth” – which is to use it in “dishonest”, unexpected, uncalled-for, gracious ways – this is begin to learn what heaven is like. This is to begin to practice the removal of debts, the relieving of burdens, the work of forgiveness and reconciliation: the achievement of the impossible in a world which thrives on the law credit and indebtedness, which demands that we earn our way.

The dishonesty of God is not a moral failing, but God's own refusal to play by the rules, to cut the cost of life with him through gift and call to repentance. It is the “children of light” who receive this gift and call, and are to become themselves light to the world.

By the grace of God may we, with all our dishonest wealth, find in the shrewdness of God's dealings with the world another, better way with what we have, and so begin to build something worth building on the foundation which God has laid for our eternal homes.

Amen.
