

THE SHREWD ESTATE MANAGER AND JUBILEE

Sermon preached on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost at Christ's Church, Cathedral, Hamilton by Bishop Terry Brown. Text: Luke 16: 1-13.

Today, we are faced with one of Jesus's more puzzling parables, at least on the surface. The Jesus Seminar, an ecumenical project of biblical scholars committed to trying to discern which of the words of Jesus were most likely actually said by him, and which were more shaped by the Gospel writers, argues that the first eight and a half verses were a genuine parable of Jesus, ending with the punch line, so to speak, "And the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly", full stop. Anything after that, they argue, was a Lukan interpretation for the readers and listeners in his community.

However, before we go on, since this is the "season of creation," let us add a bit of creation-related context. Jesus, as a rabbi-in-training, would have learned of God's creation of the world in Genesis, with the divine words at the end of each day, "And God saw that it was good." He would have been aware of the psalms and their celebration of creation, and their distrust of the dishonest and corrupt exploitation of it at the expense of the poor. Jesus would have been aware of the importance of Sabbath and Jubilee, in which humanity and creation are given a rest from exploitation, debts are forgiven, and a new beginning is possible. He would have been aware of Job's assertion, amidst his suffering, of his innocence regarding his treatment of the land. Job cried out:

If my land has cried out against me, and its furrows have wept together, if I have eaten its yield without payment, and caused the death of its owners; let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley. (31:38-40)

Likewise, Jesus would have been aware of creation around him and its precariousness, subject to drought, earthquakes, and floods. Yet, he also recognized its beauty, as in his appreciation of "the lilies of the field." As a young carpenter, he and Joseph would have been concerned with where they were to find their timber. In biblical times, survival alone required some sort of positive and constructive relation with nature and creation, including conservation and wise use. In this context, rich landowners or merchants were very ambiguous, if not problematic, figures, certainly not capitalist heroes, and were subject to Jesus's critical scrutiny, as in this parable. Often Jesus begins a story with a rich person, then turns the tables.

Into this context comes our poor estate manager. A rumour has gone around that he is mismanaging the rich merchant's funds; the rumour has finally reached the rich merchant and he instantly believes it. He calls the estate manager in, fires him, and demands to see the accounts. Here is the first injustice. We really do not know if the estate manager was guilty or not, he is not given a chance to defend himself or plead his innocence. Already he has a case for "wrongful dismissal" under Ontario law, but that was not how matters worked in Jesus's time. Estate managers had a low social status; they were often slaves, though our estate manager was a free man, as he now had to face life without a job. He did not have enough social clout to challenge his rich employer's decision and he accepted his firing, right or wrong. However, he has good relations with his customers who have been buying provisions from him. Some

commentators suggest that the customers were the estate manager's fellow villagers, already his friends and relatives, and not complete strangers. Strikingly, the debts were not for luxury items but for basic staples, olive oil and wheat, components of bread, and in huge quantities, suggesting that the customers were not having an easy time financially. Perhaps there was a draught or times were very hard. Jesus's sympathy would have been with these indebted customers, not the rich merchant.

The "shrewd" estate manager has a very clever idea. It turns out that he knows the books very well, he is not incompetent, so he discounts the invoices. Since he is being fired without recourse (and his rich employer has not required repayment), he has nothing to lose. (His employer has not learned 21st century management advice: if you are going to fire someone, do it on a Friday and don't let them take any company records with them.) The estate manager offers the poor customers a Jubilee from their debts, at the same time becoming their friend and benefactor. The bill for 100 jugs of olive oil is reduced by half; the bill for 100 containers of wheat is reduced to 80. These are large amounts and do represent a debt Jubilee for the customers and their families. There must have been great celebration.

The rich merchant discovers what has happened and realizes he has been outwitted by his estate manager and cannot but admire his cleverness. Since the estate manager had authority and used it definitively, the rich merchant could not go back and re-submit the proper invoices. It would be mean and petty, and he could probably absorb the loss anyway. Indeed, the estate manager increased the rich merchant's prestige among his customers, as not just rich but generous. The whole parable, ended here, becomes a kind of three-way win-win-win situation: the indebted customers gain a Jubilee from their debts, the estate manager has exercised generosity and gained friends who will help him survive without a job, and even the rich merchant has gained prestige and admiration, despite his loss, and perhaps even had a kind of conversion experience. Rather than being angry and (so to speak) calling in the police or taking the estate manager to court, he expresses admiration, because the estate manager had "*acted shrewdly.*" Some commentators suggest that this parable is nearest Jesus's teaching of turning the other cheek. Perhaps or probably cheated by his estate manager, the rich merchant turns his other cheek and accepts it, thus forwarding of the reign of God in the process.

Ended here, the parable suggests that we are called to be contextually shrewd for the sake of the reign of God: to accept reality, whatever it is, and make the most of it for the sake of the reign of God. If we are in the situation of the rich merchant, perhaps we need to learn that our wealth and the accumulation of wealth is not something to be idolized and that we can afford to share. If we find ourselves in a mess of some sort or another, like the estate manager, whether of our own doing or another's, we can use our shrewdness to make the best of the situation, not just for ourselves but for others as well, that is, for the reign of God. And if we relate with the indebted ones in the story, we can work and hope for Jubilee, that church and society will operate with generosity and forgiveness rather than selfishness and greed. It puzzles me (and, I hope, you) to see people who claim they are Christians questioning, for example, student debt forgiveness. Have they never heard of Jubilee in Leviticus: rest for the land, property returned to its original owners, forgiveness of debts?

But to say a few words about the rest of the Gospel passage: I believe a good argument can be made that what follows is very much Luke's interpretation of Jesus' parable for his urban Gentile hearers, who, unfamiliar with the Jewish context of Sabbath and Jubilee, would immediately have related with the rich merchant and regarded the estate manager as a criminal deserving of punishment. Likely Luke has used Jesus's words from other situations and contexts. The second half of verse 8, "the children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light," is an aphorism used elsewhere in Scripture and in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In effect, it criminalizes the parable, seeing the rich merchant's and estate manager's actions as just a part of the "world of darkness," although Luke still commends shrewdness for the "children of light," presumably us. But the next verse, make friends with mammon (or dishonest wealth) so that when it is gone you may be welcomed into "the eternal homes" does not make a lot of sense; there are variants in the early Greek texts that suggest that even the Greek may be corrupt. Perhaps the best one can say, is that somehow "shrewdness" regarding corrupt wealth will incorporate us into God's final reign.

Likewise, the concluding verses seem to go off onto another theme, that of honesty and dishonesty, further criminalizing the estate manager whom Jesus has already praised for being shrewd. The passage is moving towards another declaration of Jesus which follows but is not included in today's Gospel: "No slave can serve two masters . . . you cannot serve God and mammon (dishonest wealth)". That may well be, but the parable is about someone who managed to use mammon to serve God, cleverly outwitting the system. The parable is more in the spirit of William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army. People complained to him that he accepted donations from wealthy capitalists whose factories were creating many of the problems the Salvation Army was trying to address. Booth replied, "I'd accept money from the devil himself, if it were for the Lord's work."

The operative word in the parable is "shrewd", the Greek *phronimos*, a very positive word connoting thoughtfulness, discretion, intelligence, and acumen. Perhaps we might say "clever wisdom." In the parable, it is shrewdness amidst moral ambiguity, making the best of a difficult situation. Thinking about this word this week, very many of the obituaries of our late Queen mention her "shrewdness", linked with many other virtues such as compassion, faithfulness, and kindness. And shrewd she had to be, given the horrific history of British imperialism (right down to our Indian Residential Schools), the enormous wealth of the royal family and the variety of political leaders she had to deal with, all the time constrained as a constitutional monarch and a national public figure, always subject to a potentially hostile media. Her Christian shrewdness bore fruit, quietly supporting the good and eschewing the evil. King Charles will also need to employ such shrewdness. Surely his anointing at the coronation will convey that gift of the Spirit: shrewd wisdom.

But what of us simpler folk? In whatever situation we find ourselves (and everyone's situation and history is very different), we can exercise shrewdness for the reign and love of God: for family, friends, church, country, world, creation, and, indeed, those we deem our "enemies" or threats. We can step back, retreat in quiet thought, to reflect on how we are living our lives: how we are dealing with success or failure, tragedy or joy, stability or transition, being young or getting old – and how we might be just a bit shrewder for the benefit of all and

the reign of God. God has given us the resources to do so, and, in Paul's words in Philippians, work out our own salvation in fear and trembling. And another parable reminds us that we are to be like the householder who brings out treasures both old and new from the storeroom. God gives us the resources to be shrewd for the reign of God. We need only the commitment and energy to exercise them, both as individuals and a community. And even if we try and fail, God's greater grace will always prevail, and we may be surprised by the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God.