

Reflection for Pentecost 15 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

In today's Gospel reading, we hear Jesus tell the parable of the dishonest manager. At first glance, it might appear that Jesus is condoning the manager's dishonesty – but it is not quite like that! So, let's look closer at what Jesus is saying and what he meant.

When Jesus told parables, he was using a situation from every-day life to teach spiritual principles of the Kingdom of God.

When he talked about the wise and foolish builders, for example, he wasn't telling them how and where to build houses, **but** the importance of hearing, understanding and then putting his teaching into practice (Mt. 7.24-27); those who did not heed his teaching had faith that **would not** withstand all the onslaughts that a secular and sometimes evil world would subject it to. On the other hand, those **who did**, had faith which had the "foundations" to withstand all that the world could throw at them.

But as with a lot of passages in the Bible, today's reading - the parable of the shrewd manager (Lk. 16.1-13) - needs to be read carefully. Jesus wasn't condoning the man's dishonesty. Nor was he telling the story as an example of how not to behave. Shocked as we may be that Jesus took such an example, we need to grasp that he was using this unlikely story to teach us a number of positive spiritual principles.

At first the man is accused, not of dishonesty, but of bad management - "wasting [the rich man's] possessions" (v. 1). That is why the rich man wants to "sack" him.

Before he leaves, however, he approaches the rich man's debtors - possibly people to whom land was leased - the rent to be paid in kind. He then has them write out new IOU receipts, reducing their indebtedness - one by 50%, another by 20% so making friends for a time when he would be out of work and needy.

On learning about this, the master, instead of being angry, commended the now clearly dishonest manager for this shrewdness - perhaps the manager's first bit of business initiative.

The dishonest manager only had access to his master's wealth for a very short time. He didn't steal it or try to save it - he put it to work.

Following the parable, Jesus makes the intriguing observation, "the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light" (v. 8b) – an observation that itself, could take a whole sermon to explore!

But briefly, Jesus is reminding us that in our stewardship of the resources with which we are blessed, we need to be as careful and diligent as "the people of this world". And we must always remember that when we talk about resources here, these not just material resources, **but most importantly us** - as the children of God, as Christ's followers. We are by far the most valuable of all and we must all use our talents wisely, as well as those material resources with which we are blessed, in the service of furthering God's kingdom in a world which so badly needs it.

The shrewd manager sees he is in trouble and prepares for the future. His view of the future is rather limited. But then, some Christians are almost as limited - using their possessions almost exclusively to ensure comfortable security for themselves and their families!

"Worldly wealth" will eventually be "gone." None of us can take it with us.

A young man proudly declared, "My uncle died a millionaire." "He what?" someone asked. "He died a millionaire." "No, he didn't!" "But you didn't know my uncle!" "True, but he

didn't die a millionaire." "What do you mean by that?" replied the young man to which the other person replied "Who has the million now?"

"Money" - more literally "Mammon" - can be a rival to God for our allegiance. **Of course**, it isn't bad in itself – it is a gift from God, a blessing, and it helps us in God's mission on this earth - **but we must never lose sight of the fact that it becomes an evil when we begin to love it and serve it - to the exclusion of serving and loving God in a world so very much in need of His love.**

*The nub of the message that Jesus is trying to get across to us in this parable is that the dishonest manager's time was almost up. He only had access to **his master's wealth** for a very short time. He didn't steal it or try to save it - he put it to work; we are on this earth only for a relatively short period of time – we have access to the **richness and spirituality of our Faith** – are we going to use that access to further God's Kingdom on this earth?*

Jesus goes on, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?" (vv. 10-12)

There is a very practical principle here. A person who seeks advancement in employment must be faithful in small tasks before being given more responsibility. Dishonesty in small things shows that a person cannot be trusted with much.

A new employee took a phone call. With his hand over the mouth-piece, he said, "Boss, it's for you." The boss indicated he was to say he was out. With that, the employee held the phone out to the boss - "You tell him, Boss!" The boss was furious. He was about to sack the employee. "You embarrassed me! What put it into your head to do such a thing?" "It's like this, Boss," the employee replied, "if I start telling lies **for** you, the time might come when I tell lies **against** you." With that he retained his job and became a faithful employee and confidant for many years.

But Jesus is going beyond human employment. Whatever assets we have are a means of living. They aren't the essence of living itself. They aren't the "true riches" of eternity. They are on loan to us. They aren't what Jesus calls "property of your own." God offers love, joy, peace, meaning - and all eternity. Why settle for less? Yet our faithfulness in using our assets as stewards of his Kingdom will have a bearing on our ability to receive the riches that will be truly ours.

Jesus adds, "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (v. 13).

All of us are servants. All of us will be held to account for our stewardship. The question is though, who or what are we serving?

So let us be sure about our stewardship. Invest all that we do and have in following our Lord our Saviour Jesus Christ and in so doing experience the true love and joy which can only be found in Him. Let us spread His love and joy to the world surrounding us, again one which particularly at the moment is in dire need of it.

For all of us, the time will come when earthly things will fail and we must stand before God and give account of ourselves.

AMEN