

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
18th September 2022 - 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year C): 1st: Amos 8:4-7. Psalm: 112:1-2,4-8. 2nd: 1 Timothy 2:1-8. **Gospel:** Luke 16:1-13.

Evangelii Gaudium, the Joy of the Gospel, calls us to be joyous in proclaiming our faith. It was the first encyclical of Pope Francis, within a few months of his election in 2013. What we all know it certainly isn't easy. Was it ever? Certainly not these days.

Today's parable, which is unique to St Luke, is notoriously hard to understand. A steward is accused of mismanaging his master's property. When confronted he makes no attempt to prove his innocence.

Fearful of how he will survive when dismissed from his position, he summons his master's debtors one by one and tells each of them to reduce the debt they own his master. As a result of his help the debtors are placed under an obligation to help the steward in the future and he avoids the risk of destitution.

In his comments following the parable Jesus highlights the steward's shrewdness and commends it, and he invites us as his disciples to be canny and clever in the same way. It seems a rather shocking message. The steward's behaviour can make us feel uncomfortable. No one likes a cheat or a deceiver. After the passing of 2000 years, it's difficult to judge the business practices that both the steward and his master were employing.

In the Palestine of Jesus, many large estates were owned by absentee landlords who left the running of the business to a steward. Such people usually ran the business to their own advantage. Provided the owner got what he considered a regular income, he was not too bothered about how the steward supplemented his own income. The landowner in this parable has heard that his steward has probably gone too far in shady dealing and fires him. Faced with ruin, the steward begins running through his options.

Hard work is out of the question. So is begging. Both would entail a loss of status in a community in which a person's reputation was paramount. The only option left is to call in all the favours that are owed him. Jewish law forbade lending at interest. But there was a way round it.

The rabbi's knew that unless the lender could foresee some return on the loan, he was unlikely to tie up his money with no hope of reward. This might mean more hardship for the poor unable to borrow to get them out of a hard time.

The solution went something like this. When someone wanted to borrow something, they agreed to an amount to be repaid but a larger amount was handed over. The difference constituted the interest. This parable has a number of examples of this. The person who borrowed 50 measures of oil agreed to repay 100, the borrower of 80 measures of wheat agreed to pay 100 and so on. The extra 50 or 20 was probably the steward's take, as it was he who negotiated the deals. By inviting the borrowers to write smaller sums on their bonds, he is doing them a favour but losing out himself.

Known perhaps in the past for driving a hard bargain, he is acquiring a reputation for fair play and generosity, and he won't lose out by the rise in his public esteem. If the borrowers have gained a little money, they have also taken on a new obligation to take care of him. Instead of feeling cheated, the landowner is forced to smile at the steward's ingenuity.

This in turn draws from Jesus the comment that 'the children of this world are much more astute business people than the children of light.' He goes further advising wealthy Christians to make the best use of their wealth for the sake of the kingdom.

We are called to use our resources – money, but all our God-given resources – in a way which does good, builds up the kingdom, and wins the admiration and affection of others. It is not the money that is the

problem, but our attitude to it. In the kingdom of God the shrewd use of money is for the furthering of the kingdom, and esp. to the poor and needy.

Possessions are a responsibility. Their use is a test of character, values and stewardship. For the one who is faithful in little is also faithful in much. God wants us to be good stewards of what we have; not wasteful. Every gift of the Creator comes with the responsibility of using it and sharing it.

If this parable helps us to know how best to react when confronted with a crisis, then it will have taught us a useful lesson.

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