



Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 18 September 2022

READINGS

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

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Greetings Friends. May I speak in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Once again, we are presented with a challenging, if not also confusing, Gospel reading. The parable, however, clearly has something to do with money (I always seem to land with these kinds of parables). If, therefore, it has to do with money, let us explore in what ways.

We are firstly introduced by Luke to a “rich man” who has a manager (v.1). Let us consider their relationship more closely. The “rich man” was what is referred to elsewhere in the NT as an *oikodespotes*, which is usually translated as “landowner” and sometimes as “master of the house”. *Oikos*, in ancient Greek means “household” (but a household of a particular kind, as we will see in a moment), and *despotes* means “ruler” (from which we get the modern English word despot). The “manager” of the “house” was the *oikonomos*, where *oikos* again means “house” and *nomos* means “law”, i.e. one who enforces the law of the household, usually in the absence of the *oikodespotes*.

Invariably then, the *oikodespotes* would be a member of the wealthy elite, residing in the urban centre. He would likely own multiple farms or manors in the rural countryside which would be managed by an *oikonomos* appointed at each manor. The nature of such a manor therefore was not primarily to accommodate or house the *oikodespotes* and his family, but to make a commercial profit for the *oikodespotes*. *Oikonomos*, incidentally, is the same word from which we get the word economy.

To have an *oikonomos* mismanaging or squandering the property of an *oikodespotes* would be something akin to a mid-level manager finding ways to embezzle funds under the nose of the CEO of a company. Not only was this grounds for dismissal but, in today’s context, most likely also criminal charges.

Now we have a better view of the relationship between the “rich man” and his manager. On realising that his master has got wind of his shenanigans, he knows full well what is in store for him. Cleverly, in order to expediate the repayment of his master’s loans, he reduces the debts owed to him (probably by removing the interest). As a result, we assume, the master has his loans repaid faster than they otherwise would have been, and the *oikonomos* receives the commendation of his master for acting shrewdly.

What then is Jesus saying in telling this parable? The manager is commended by his master for being *phronimos*, shrewd or wise or cunning. The same word is used in Matthew 10:16 where Jesus instructs his disciples to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves”. Verse 9 of Luke 16 is perhaps the most difficult to interpret. The NRSV reads, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” A cryptically confusing verse if ever there was one! The word rendered “dishonest wealth” appears in traditional translations as mammon. The origins of the concept or idea of mammon and what it represents are unclear. It is possible that it represented a deity within ancient Mesopotamian culture that was somehow tied to material wealth.

Why Jesus exhorts his hearers to make friends “by means of mammon” is unclear. Less clear still is how such friends would be able to welcome one into their “eternal homes.” The quality however which Jesus is highlighting, and by extension, encouraging his hearers to emulate, is shrewdness. Certainly, for the average Jew 2000 years ago, shrewdness was a necessary, sometimes even life-saving quality, even as it is today. The trick is perhaps to maintain that balance between innocence and shrewdness.

In his own aphoristic appraisal of the parable, Jesus is able to draw a second lesson. The manager of the household was not faithful to his master, but instead seemingly fell prey to the lure of personal material gain and hence mismanaged his master’s property. As a result, at the very least, he would have lost his position as *oikonomos* and been expelled from his master’s manor.

As we continue to contemplate these things, brothers and sisters, may God’s hand of protection, guidance and blessing remain upon you.

Amen