

GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF YOUR MANAGEMENT

A wonderfully clever rascal

Luke 16.1-13

Introduction

Do you remember Tom and Jerry? I know some of you are old enough. And there have been millions of re-runs on TV. This is an ancient Tom and Jerry parable; the little smart mouse matches wits with the very big cat and wins.

I can imagine Jesus' audience having a great guffaw at this mismatch of wits. And that is one of the problems with parable. We don't get the humour, the wit, both of the story teller and of-stage audience.

To put another twist on it, this is a Robin Hood tale that the ancient villager, poor as all get out, would have recognized. We only think of personal wealth so we miss the point. They saw the whole village economy awash with unimaginable wealth at the expense of the rich man.

We could even consider this to be an ancient equivalent of the TV series *The Sting*; a series about a bunch of rascally, loveable confidence tricksters. Each week some arrogant rich fool got their come-uppance through the daring outrageous, out-of-left-field

boldness of these rogues who shared highly selective morality. And we cheered from our couches.

When Jesus' says 'there was a rich man' he signals to the peasant audience to pay attention. Something could be said here that could be great fun. There is another parable at the end of this chapter that begins the same way but is more tragedy; the rich man and Lazarus.

And if this parable puzzles or annoys you don't be surprised: it is a rich story full of rich contradictions that bemuse and beguile the reader and challenge the disciple.

The story

In this passage Jesus turns from his response to the Pharisees and the legal experts' complaint in chapter 15 that he has table fellowship with toll collectors and sinners.

He now turns and addresses his disciples but the themes remain the same; in the kingdom of the lost and the found all are welcome at the table.

Chapter 16 turns the polemics of chapter 15 into instruction for disciples who may sympathise with Pharisaic views so the parable we read today has many links with the parable of the prodigal son (15.11-32 can you spot some?).

This story is an example from everyday life, from taken-for-granted suppositions about 'how the world works.' It's all about how a man uses wealth to make friends, a not uncommon human activity.

Someone, a reliable source, a whistleblower, tells the rich man that he ought not trust his estate manager. In this introduction we are introduced to the three main players; the rich man, his estate manager and, just off stage, the community.

The master calls the manager and calls him to account. He asks for the books to be handed over. The manager doesn't argue; he says nothing. We might have expected him to protest or call witnesses or exercise some other ploy. But he is silent. He accepts the verdict.

His fertile brain works overtime. Before he hands the books over he will use the little time that people think that he still has authority to set himself up. It is completely illegal and probably not binding on the master. But he hopes to be on his way cushioned by his deals long before anyone finds out.

He strikes deals in private and in haste; a deal that will allow the masters' debtors to say in public that they had no idea this was a scam. And the scam is huge. The village economy will be awash with wealth for years to come. The manager will find a safe place and comfort.

It is important to notice that the story is not talking about small amounts. The debts outstanding a very large indeed and indicate something of the master's wealth (5-7). And they tell us something of the large debt the manager is now owed. He has become the villagers' benefactor; and because the manager is still perceived as acting on behalf of the master everyone save face.

Because he is their benefactor, at the master's expense of course, he can now expect a welcome and a job. There would be bound to be some village businessman who would want such a smart operator on his side. He wouldn't trust him of course but what an asset. We could easily apply the idea to sections of our economy. Financial services in the big banks?

And the master does what the manager was counting on. He does not jail him: Instead he commends the manager's shrewdness. The master is merciful to him. And that is the unexpected twist in the tail. The audience may have guffawed as the rogue took the 'rich man' down but must have wondered why he did not do what rich men do; use their power to destroy.

I have tried to elucidate just enough of the details of ancient social life that abound in this story to get the point. And what is the point?

It is story about shrewdness not dishonesty

There is the world of difference between 'I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted shrewdly and cleverly' and 'I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly.' In other words 'This is a fraud; but a most ingenious fraud. The steward is a rascal but he is a wonderfully clever rascal.'

But it is the story of a crisis. The man recognized that his whole life was about to go down the toilet. That is a crisis. Some of us have faced such a crisis in our own lives. And the commendation of shrewdness applies to his handling of the crisis that faces him. He had to put together a strategy to survive the crisis and flourish. He had to think hard and long. And he did and he was successful.

Jesus comments that the children of this age, the present age opposed to the kingdom of God, understand how the world works and use it for their benefit.

So where does that get us?

In the first instance the story is about Israel and God

Israel is God's steward, God's property manager in God's world. It is the light to the world cultivating God's mercy and justice and peace and showing how it might work for all.

Israel's leaders in Jesus' day were not reaching out to the toll collectors, the sinners, the prodigal sons, the disreputable woman of

Luke 7 or others. Instead they drew the boundaries tighter and tighter to make Israel more holy.

Jesus is the point of crisis. How will Israel respond to him? Will they throw caution to the winds? Will they open the boundary gates to the people Jesus was reaching?

Jesus was trying to warn them that this crisis would not go away and trouble loomed on the horizon. They needed the manager's shrewdness to break through and flourish just as Jesus was showing them. They needed to find lasting homes in the midst of chaos.

But what about us?

Disciples must be smart about both the ways of the world and the kingdom

Jesus is saying to his disciples, 'Don't be clueless.' Understand the village/world; understand the kingdom. There is no either /or here. Jesus wanted the disciples to understand the village with its status structure, social power, economics, and to use it. Jesus sets us firmly in the village.

In the village we have to make strategies to show the village how to thrive in mercy, justice, peace, truth-making that mimics the kingdom of God. So it is God's mercy and justice not Aristotle's that we nurture.

And we do that by being wise. Theology is about learning wisdom; how to make clear strategies so that the kingdom agenda of renewal of the village can come to be.

Verses 10-13 pick up the theme of wealth as an illustration to make that simple point. Mammon may belong to this age and it is certainly used dishonestly, and it will strive to master us.

But the disciple must use it, not with the principles of status, honour, power or patronage in mind, but with the ideas Jesus has taught about wealth and the kingdom in mind.

Money is not a possession but a trust for God's glory and the welfare of his people. It is not for private glory or glamour. Being faithful with dishonest wealth, means using it for those who cannot return it (6.32-35), give to those from whom we can gain no status and receive no honour and that leads to eternal treasure (12.33; 14.12-14) hospitality and welcome. Being faithful with what is God's is the key.

Conclusion

This story tells us that need to learn to combine knowledge, understanding, good judgment, discernment and good decision-making. We need to work with prudence, justice and compassion. That is wisdom-making.

Such work, and work it is, is collegial and conversational and is our communal responsibility. Only that way may we do justice to the many contexts, levels, voices, moods that make up our village. Only then do we do justice to scriptures and worship.

Are you ready for it? You won't survive the present crisis and thrive unless you are.