

Where lie our priorities?

Not for the first time, I find myself trying to make sense of some complex stories employed by Jesus in his teaching and try to convey them to you. A couple of weeks ago I was preaching about the potential dangers in living out our baptismal promises and walking the way of Jesus and the stark tone adopted by Jesus in highlighting the hazards that lay ahead for his disciples, a verbal equivalent of taking someone by the shirt and shaking them.

Today, Jesus is employing a parable to try and tease out of us a better understanding of our priorities. Luke seemed to focus on the parables of Jesus as the teaching tools for his disciples and anyone who interacted with Him. Jesus used parables to convey a moral truth, a lesson for the listener on how to live their lives. The parables start quite mildly – parable of the Sower of seeds and the parable of the good Samaritan. But the tone becomes sterner as His ministry proceeds and develop greater substance, which is where we are today. Perhaps the tone becomes more complicated as Jesus, tired of constantly answering the same questions recognises that he is running out of time as he proceeds inexorably towards Jerusalem and his death.

However, I think we need to start with our Amos reading as it does help to provide a way into an understanding of Luke and this particular parable.

There is no doubt that Amos makes for some uncomfortable reading. He is pronouncing “woe” on those who are indifferent to suffering, neglectful of religion, dishonest and exploitive. Do we feel that to be a fair description of any of us? Or, have we suffered at the hands of someone who has exploited their position of power to our detriment. I admit to never having bought a pair of shoes for a needy person but I have perhaps on occasion gone a bit over the top in the purchase of a fancy pair of shoes when something more practical would have served me better and are sitting at the back of my wardrobe laughing at me because I can no longer wear that style of shoe, nor will again!

Amos is trying to tell us that if we do not have the self-discipline to be generous with this world’s goods or if our faith is insufficient to make us observe the tenets of our faith ungrudgingly, or if we resort to spiritual contortions to shunt the sufferings of others out of sight and mind then at the very least, we should acknowledge that we need to hear God’s “woe” upon us. We can acknowledge failing even if it does not bring about the fullest repentance of a grace-filled heart.

If Old Testament “woe” sends us scurrying for comfort to the New, then the reassurance offered by St Paul in 1 Timothy comes with a calling. It is a prayer for “peace” – not the ultimate spiritual vision of the “peace that passes all understanding” [Philippians 4.6) but rather “peace and quiet” and absence of violence at one end of the spectrum and hassle at the other.

Paul’s exhortation may appear somewhat daunting if we are suffering from “compassion fatigue” from the usual diet of bad news we receive from the media. Paul here is urging Christians to the work and power of the intercessory prayer in all its breadth and depth. Prayers should be *offered for everyone*; Paul says and especially for ‘kings and all who are in high positions.’ Very topical as we mourn the passing of Queen Elizabeth and proclaim and pray for our new King Charles. But is this realistic? How is it possible to take on the concerns of everyone in our prayers?

This does seem to represent the opposite ends of the spectrum to those prayers Jesus urges us to make for our own needs or the needs of those close to us (Matthew 7.7-11) but Paul’s purpose and the context in which he is writing are all important. Christian

communities under persecution found it hard to gain acceptance within the societies of the time. It would be understandable if they were tempted to pull up the drawbridge and withdraw into their own world but Paul is urging the community to engage fully with that world, through prayer, even though it may have been hostile to them. Christ's salvation was for all and the Christians' prayers needed to reflect that reality. And that reality continues today. Are we able to pray for the forces opposed to Christ and his message so that we too may live 'a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity?'

What has been interesting in viewing and listening to the extensive tv coverage following the Queen's death has been the frequent invocation of God by both our new King and political leaders in their offering of condolences and delivering of loyal addresses in parliaments and assemblies and the language in which they have been couched.

In the days when BCP (Book of Common Prayer) was our only prayer book, prayers for the Sovereign were a daily duty. They do not speak challenging truth to power or express any higher calling for His Majesty's subjects than to "serve, honour and humbly obey". The virtue that they do still embody is a common desire for peace and wise exercise of authority. Whilst we resist using BCP these days, in our mainstream services, that perceived sense of redundancy has been somewhat upended by employment of language redolent of Cranmer and Tudor England or Shakespeare in the official ceremonies and Proclamation of Accession we have been listening to over the last week. No suggestion has been made that nobody would understand or comprehend the messages being delivered in that form.

Both Amos and Paul in 1 Timothy share a vision of that combines straightforward morality with devotion. But that can't be said of our Gospel reading with its somewhat strange parable with its paradoxical commendation of dishonesty. In the ancient world paradoxes were employed in the teaching of philosophy or the art of reasoning. One such paradox is called the Cretan-liar" paradox. The Cretan says – "all Cretans are liars" But, if he is telling the truth, he is lying; and, if he is lying, he must be telling the truth!

In the parables, a "master" (of slaves in traditional translations) and "servants" if you prefer, usually stands for God. Now at casual reading, it might appear that God approves of dishonest means, provided the end is good. But we cannot even call the "steward's" motivation 'good' because it is purely for self-preservation and pride. It is an example of the shrewd and self-interested avoiding their responsibilities and create indebtedness, caring nothing for justice or community wellbeing.

When mammon is the god being worshipped, much human ingenuity goes into designing systems that benefit a few at the expense of the many. For instance, paying someone to take on your zero-carbon footprint so that you feel guilt free as you continue to fly around the world in your personal jet. We might try to justify ourselves, but we know – and God definitely knows, that we are reluctant to put all our resources at God's disposal. Instead, we put our energy and our time into whatever, superficially, makes us feel safe and successful. Beneath the surface however, we don't trust God's provision. Perhaps because we just don't know God well enough to believe that God wants us to be eternally rich – now.

One scholar found it so embarrassing for the master to be praising the steward that he argued the word "praise" must really mean "condemn". If we cannot find any easy answers to the moral meaning of that praise, we can at least be sure that such puzzles help us not to over-simplify Jesus' message.

True riches are the fruit of God's Spirit flourishing in the hearts of godly men and women of integrity. 'Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-

control' (Galatians 5.22-23) cannot be purchased and cannot be sold, but multiply as God works in and among those who follow Jesus.

There are two things we can take away from this parable and which shine with perfect clarity amid the dark enigma of the paradox. One is that the only person who has been wronged by the steward's behaviour is the master. The other is that the master chooses to remit the debt in an act of undeserved generosity and forgiveness. This confirms that the master stands for God because that is the very definition of divine grace. Amen