

Sermon - being children of light

Based on: Luke 16.1–13

Different ways of engaging with Scripture

- The manner in which we engage with Scripture can have a significant impact upon how we understand it.
- If we approach Scripture as a factually accurate record of various events and conversations then we'll perceive its meaning to be determined literalistically.
- If we regard Scripture as being more like poetry, then we will be open to similes, metaphors, allusions, and bring our own imagination to how we might understand its meaning.
- This difference is also true between Scripture that we ponder for ourselves, asking questions and discussing it with others, compared with listening to a sermon or reading a commentary that perhaps presents someone else's conclusion, after they have done some pondering of their own.
- So when it comes to today's Gospel story about the dishonest manager, you might have heard sermons that provided one or another rationalisation of this challenging text.
- The difficulty of interpretation might have been explained by a preacher when perhaps it would be better if we sat in groups and asked questions of each other about it, and listened to each other's suggestions.
- So today I'm going to offer some thoughts for you to take further for yourselves, rather than give you some definite conclusions.

Is each parable's meaning 'obvious'?

- The first insight is that for some parables Jesus offers an understanding of their meaning, whereas for others he leaves their meaning or conclusion open for the listener to decide for themselves.
- So last Sunday we heard the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and Jesus explains that when the lost is found there is rejoicing in heaven. (*cf Luke 15.1-10*)
- The well known parable of the prodigal son is told straight afterwards, and initially it seems to conclude with a party so that the community can rejoice in the lost son not only returning home, but being restored to his family. (*cf Luke 15.11-32*)
- However, Jesus continues the story to include the older brother's anger about the celebration given to the younger, and concludes prematurely with a plea from the father for the older son to join the party - but, most importantly, does not describe the older son's response.
- It appears that Jesus intentionally leaves the ending for his listeners to decide for themselves: what would you do? what would your response be?
- I've been part of a Bible study group where two participants have stated that 'Of course it's obvious what happened next,' - and when asked what each thought the obvious conclusion was, one said that the older son obviously joined the party and the other said that the older son obviously didn't.
- The ending seems to be left for us to ponder about how we might respond.

Each parable sets the scene for the next

- It is helpful to have reflected briefly on that parable - the parable of the prodigal son - because today's parable of the dishonest manager comes straight afterwards.
- Now each of the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, John, and likewise Luke, appears to have chosen the order of what they included in their accounts very carefully.
- It seems that in this they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, as much as in what each of them included and excluded, from the written and oral stories that were available at the time of writing.
- The point is that the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal or lost son also set the context for the telling of the parable of the dishonest manager.

Sermon - being children of light

- There is also the context of the social situation of these stories.
- The prodigal son abuses his heritage in two ways: he squanders the family inheritance which is part of his ancestral heritage, and he ends up being a swine herd which would be anathema to a true Jew.
- Jesus provides the first twist to that story by describing how the forgiving father violates the Jewish world's honour and shame codes by celebrating his son's return.
- The father's response would have been quite shocking to those listening to Jesus' story.
- They would have been very sympathetic to the older brother's anger at his father's forgiveness.

Are we for or against the rich man?

- So as we come to the parable of the dishonest manager, it is helpful to understand the context of the manager and the rich man he works for.
- Many of those listening to Jesus would have been the poor, or comparatively poor.
- When they hear of a manager squandering the rich man's property, they would more likely have been quite comfortable with the idea of the rich man being taken advantage of.
- After all, rich men had usually gained their wealth by taking advantage of the poor, and so were not given much sympathy when they suffered any misfortune.
- The manager resolved to make his master's clients indebted to himself.
- His strategy is to make those clients complicit in deceiving their patron.
- Now Jesus describes the rich man - when he discovers what his manager has done - as acknowledging that the dishonest manager is as crafty as he is.
- The manager has figured out how to work the inequitable economic system of that time to his own advantage - and he is therefore just as corrupt as his master is.

Is being shrewd a compliment?

- Then we arrive at what appear to be some bizarre comments from Jesus:
the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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. (Luke 16.8-9)
- Firstly, Jesus contrasts the children of this age - that is, those who live according to worldly values - to the children of light - that is, those who live according to God's values.
- Which sounds appropriate until one realises that he seems to be complimenting worldly people for their shrewdness, but not those who follow God's way.
- Is being called shrewd really a compliment?
- Maybe being shrewd is a description of having worldly wisdom, rather than divine wisdom.

'Eternal tents' are not eternal!

- Secondly, Jesus appears to be making a deeply ironic statement, which is more easily comprehended when we understand that the word that has been translated into *homes* is, in the original Greek, actually *tents*.
- So Jesus refers to tents as being eternal - that is, tents that last for ever.
- Now I've read some alternative suggestions about how we might understand this description of eternal tents, but one strong contender is that Jesus was being purposefully ironic.
- There are many instances in the gospel accounts of Jesus using a range of rhetorical devices to make his point, from satire and insult to hyperbole and dramatic contrast.
- So it's quite possible his listeners would have understood *eternal tents* in the same way we might describe something being as useful as a chocolate teapot - which means that it is completely useless, since the hot water would make a chocolate teapot melt.

Sermon - being children of light

- If Jesus is being ironic here, then Jesus is letting us know that any friendship that is based on dishonest wealth is actually worthless.
- Like other rhetorical devices, Jesus would have expressed this as a way to shock people into thinking more carefully, and more deeply, about the meaning underlying his story.

Faithfulness and honesty

- But I also suggest that Jesus does not leave his listeners hanging.
- As he makes clear:
'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?' (Luke 16.10-12)
- This is a real call to faithfulness and honesty - both values that are often not rated highly by those who the world regards as successful.
- And Jesus follows this up further:
No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.' (Luke 16.13)
- I think that rather than recommending that we act like the dishonest manager, Jesus emphasises that we need to choose our priorities carefully.
- Either we follow the way of our secular culture - the way of the world around us, or we follow the way of God - the way of sacrificial love demonstrated by Jesus himself.
- This is why it is vital for us to turn to our scriptures, and particularly the gospels, and read them over and over, so that we can both become familiar with the stories told of Jesus and told by Jesus, and spend the time pondering them more deeply.

Being children of light

- Jesus refers to his disciples as children of light.
- May we seek to be enlightened by the light of Christ.
- May we seek to be wise in the way of God, rather than shrewd in the way of the dishonest.
- And may we not seek to be in service to wealth, but rather seek to be in service to God.
- I'll end by praying today's Collect again:

O God,
you are rich in love for your people:
show us the treasure that endures
and, when we are tempted by greed,
call us back into your service
and make us worthy to be
entrusted with the wealth that never fails.
We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.