

25th Sunday of Year C (2013)
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

The world likes a likeable rogue; whether it is Robin Hood stealing from the rich to give to the poor; or Richmal Cromton's "William" leading his outlaws into mayhem. The ordinary audience associates with the little man who gets one over on the mighty, the pretentious, the toffs. Jesus' audience would have loved the story of the unjust steward. They would associate with the debtors who gain a handsome bonus; would admire the cleverness of the sacked manager, and delight in the losses made by the rich landowner, who loses money but still does rather well in the story.

Let us look more closely at what is going on.

The steward has been fiddling the books, lining his pocket - and has been caught. When accused he does not deny it. Remarkably he doesn't even protest when he is summarily dismissed. Perhaps he is thankful that he has only been dismissed and not promptly sent to gaol. The merciful master instructs him to turn in the books which will presumably reveal his dishonesty. So the steward must think and act quickly. Out of a job, physically unable to do manual labour and emotionally unable to beg, destitution awaits him and a sure and painfully lingering death.

So he summons his master's debtors. These are tenants who work the master's land and hand over a fixed and agreed amount of their produce as rent. The steward calls them quickly and individually. He must work fast, speaking to them before word is out about his dismissal so they imagine he is still in charge. And he doesn't want them speaking to each other and comparing notes. He tells them to change the amounts owed - perfectly legitimate for them to do this with his authorization - provided he has the authority. The debts are cut in each case by about 500 denarii worth of produce - around the sum a labourer would earn in eighteen months, so a significant sum.

Commentators argue about whether this was the amount that the steward would take as his fee. This seems unlikely as a dishonest employee is not likely to give away what is his own when he is in perilous circumstances. No. It is the master's money and the steward is trusting that his former employer who has already shown mercy (he did not send the steward to gaol) will be merciful again *and let the deal stand*.

Word will quickly get round the village about the master's magnificent generosity. What a patron he is. What a wonderful benefactor. Never has there been a kinder, more generous master. His praise will be sung through the village

and his honour-rating will soar.

When he hears such praise of his own generosity the master must decide what to do. He could say that it was all a mistake, the deceit of a sacked and untrustworthy rogue. He could claim back the full amount of each debt. But then his name will be cursed; his esteem sink. People may not miss what they have never had; but they are deeply resentful at losing what they thought was theirs. No, he must bask in the praise he did not expect and accept the loss of the revenue he did expect. A realist he even manages to praise his steward's cuteness as a man who knows his way around in the shadowlands of deceit and corruption.

And now the sacked steward has people in his debt. The tenants owe him. For you can be sure he let them all know, just between the two of them, of course, that he had persuaded the old man on this course of action. Now there are people on whom he can depend in his hour of need. In this society, as in the world of the Sicilian Godfather, debts were always honoured when they were called in.

One of the astonishing things about this parable is the way Jesus uses a crook to speak of the way disciples should behave. He says, if the unscrupulous are so canny in their dealings with the world how much more clever should the righteous be in promoting the values of the Kingdom. Jesus was not adverse to using as illustrations people whose presence in parables would cause shock and horror. Last week we had an array of them – a shepherd and shepherds were rogues, a woman and they should not be mentioned in polite (i.e. men's) society; and an inadequate father who doesn't know how to deal with disrespectful sons, and sons who instead of honouring their father wish him dead, shame him and publicly abuse him. In other parables he will use an unjust judge, an absentee landlord, a glutton who cannot see to his own gate...inappropriate people, people who should never be role models, and he uses them to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is describing how the world is. But the world as it is can be a distorting lens which gives an insight into God's Kingdom.

Here with the dishonest steward, he is showing how money, 'that tainted thing', can be used to ensure a soft landing in a time of crisis. That does not make money an absolute good, an ultimate value to be sought after. But it can be used for useful purpose - provided it is our servant and not our master. Money can only be a means to an end, never an end in itself. We must always see money in its proper perspective. That likeable rogue Robin Hood had at least half the right idea.

