

Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland
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Jesus the Challenger Part 5
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Isaiah 43:8-13

Luke 16:1-13

Looking as we have been at the challenges which Jesus gave his disciples in their training programme, the first challenge today is that we find it hard to make head nor tail of this parable. Was Jesus really advocating sharp business practices, even immorality? Was he really saying that you can buy your way into heaven? It could be heard that way.

First of all, we need to understand how the story works. Read from a first century Jewish perspective, it seems that the master in the story has been acting himself in an underhand manner. Jews were forbidden from lending money at interest, but many people got around this by lending in kind, with commodities like oil and wheat being useful for this purpose. So, when the steward went through the various bills and deducted various amounts it is likely that he was deducting the interest which, strictly speaking, his master shouldn't have been charging anyway – with different levels of interest being charge for oil – higher – and for wheat – lower. If he reduced the bill in each case to the principal – what has actually been lent – the debtors would be delighted, but the master couldn't do anything about it without owning up to his own sharp practice. So, when he heard about it, the master can only admire the man's clever approach.

That is what is happening within the story. But a story is what it is a parable is, a story told to make a point, not a point for point analogy with real life. So, in fact this story is not a piece of moral teaching about money and how not to use it, but it is about something else altogether. It is about how we cope in a crisis. The steward in the story, the main character is a man who finds himself in a crisis. He may have brought it on himself, in fact he has, but it is no less real for all that

Jesus' disciples would know that a story which talked of a master and a steward would be about God – master – and Israel – steward. To be God's steward or property-manager was the role assigned to Israel from of old. Israel was supposed to be the one who set a good example, God's example to the rest of the world. Isaiah reminds the people of this when he calls them God's witnesses, witnesses to God's existence and God's power and the way that God acts. But Israel had failed in this task of witness, of representing God over and over again. And with the arrival of Jesus, Israel is under threat of dismissal from the role. So, what should Israel do?

The Pharisees' answer was to pull the regulations of the law even tighter, to try to make Israel more holy. This was why they put a "fence" around the law so that it would be hard to accidentally break any of the real laws, if you kept all their extra regulations. But this made life so hard and joyless that many simply turned away. They were excluding the very people that they reached out to. In the parable Jesus indicates that Israel is facing a major crisis and rather than draw things tight, the answer is to throw caution to the winds, to forget the extra bits and pieces of law which had been built up and to make friends how and where they can. That was what the children of this world would do, and in this case the children of light should learn from them, if they want to cope with their coming crisis. And so, instead of hoarding money and land, Jesus advice was to use it as far as one could to make friends. A crisis was coming in which alternative stable homes would be needed.

The first application of this parable is to the situation which was coming upon Israel.

But Jesus was telling this parable to his disciples, not to the Pharisees or to the wider crowd of Israelites. And the challenge to disciples, once we understand the story, is clear. The challenge is to sit light to the extra regulations which we impose on one another, not least in the church, which are over and above the Gospel message of the good news of God's love in Jesus. The church passes through turbulent times and frequently needs to reassess what matters and what doesn't, maybe seldom more so in the northern hemisphere than now.

Traditional mainline churches, such as this, are in decline, you would not be going too far to say that they, we, are facing our own mortality, while newer churches, here as well as in the Third World are growing and spreading. This is a parable for our times.

And what advice is Jesus giving us in this story? Surely, he is not saying throw money at your problems! In fact, having or having had money has been one of the sources of the problems which the mainline denominations face – money brings its own drawing power, its own attraction, and what and who it attracts is most often not those who are prepared to count the cost and turn their backs on everything to

follow Jesus. The solution that the parable offers us is that we should sit lightly to regulations, which are nearly always man-made. We should be creative in our service of others, using whatever we have – money if we have that, time, talents, whatever we have which we could keep for ourselves – using it to reach out to others; rather than sewing up the gospel so tightly behind procedures and rules that people turn away thinking that there is nothing there, or that if there is, it is not for them.

It is a human instinct to make rules. We do it, even without noticing when we simply get into the habit of doing things one way and not another. We do it, when we observe others and decide that their way is good. So, when I spent a summer in Western Papua with mission workers who were the first Christians and almost the first outsiders to contact certain remote tribes, we found that this was what was being assumed. One day when working on language by having a conversation with a woman, Vi, who was a trained translator, asked what people thought that being a Christian was about. And the answer came: “You have to stop smoking and going to the men’s huts and then you can be a Christian.” That had never been said, but the mission workers had been observed and since they did not do these things, this rule had grown up.

It is a human instinct to make rules: it is one way of having power over others, if we make a rule and then enforce it. We are seeing it in politics these days, as people talk of having red lines, which are rules that are imposed on a situation. This was the way of the Pharisees and for far too long and far too often has been the way of the church as well. Jesus did not come to make rules but to invite us to know ourselves loved by God and come into a family relationship with him: changes in our behaviour would and will flow from the genuineness of that relationship, not from blind, dogged, resentful following of rules.

It is a human instinct to make rules: but we are called to repent of living in the world’s way and turn to follow Jesus. We are called to live out of love for him and let that determine how we act in the world. We are called to serve God not wealth. And that is a challenge. It is a challenge which will never go away, it is not something which we can do once and then it is done, but an ongoing challenge to us.

The steward in the parable was not perfect, but in the face of his personal crisis he was wise. He knew that he would need the goodwill of others if he was to find another job, if he was going to have a means of living in the future when he was sacked. He could have dealt with his personal worry by showing up his employer, or by calling in all the debts with interest so that others suffered as well as him. These would have been quite understandable reactions. But instead he is generous where he can be. He releases people from the burdens that he, acting for his master, has laid on them. He reaches out and seeks to make life better for them.

It is no secret to us that we are a church under stress. We are stressed locally, and we are stressed nationally. When you go to General Assembly or if you read some online forums, you will hear the voices of those who claim that our only way forward is to become stricter, to try to enforce again the church culture of the past. And these voices can be hard to resist, because there is a very fine line at times between what is church culture and what is genuine serving God in love. Often the two can be the same. But when it is suggested that we build walls and keep people away, when it is suggested that there are those who are not reached by God's love, when it is suggested that there is only one way to be a church, then we need to stand up and disagree. Make friends, said Jesus. Make friends even with worldly wealth. Make friends with whatever you have. Reaching out and making friends is what is important. Bringing the love of God to people is what is important. Serving God first of all, not serving what God gives, is what is important.

We are a church under stress. Many of you lament to me that there are not more of our community who come to join with us on a Sunday. So, reach out and make friends. Reach out with the love of God and remember that gathering on a Sunday may be what the church has always done, but it is not the most important defining mark of being a church. The only way that church is defined or should be defined is that it consists of those who follow Jesus. And Jesus, with joy with laughter and funny, though pointed stories, with healing and help reached out.