

Sermon for 21st September 2025, fourteenth after Trinity

May I speak...

The parable of the unjust steward. It's a knotty story, and I can think of a number of great writers who have quoted it. Rudyard Kipling, Anthony Powell and Dorothy L. Sayers all spring to mind. And each of them emphasized how difficult this text is.

It's worth quickly recapping what actually happens in the story. The steward, who was a manager in charge of the owner's property, has been discovered as a dishonest man. He is going to be dismissed from the owner's service, and realizes he has no other way to support himself. There is work in the fields, but he says "I am not strong enough to dig" – he has been leading a life as a white-collar worker, and is not fit to do hard manual labour – or he can sit and beg, but he says "I am ashamed to beg". There is no role left for him in this world of farms and fields. He decides he will go from living off one person, the owner, to living off other people. In the natural way of business, there are lots of people who owe his master money or commodities. Perhaps he has given them money in advance for the produce of their olive grove, or they've received grain from him for milling and are due to pay the price back when they sell the flour. He quickly calls these people to him, and looks at what they owe. Then he tells them he'll let them falsify their debts – they can write a false account and he'll counter-sign to agree to it. He says to one man who owes a hundred containers of wheat that he'll take eighty, giving the man a gift of twenty whole containers by his fraud. Another man owes a hundred jugs of olive oil, but the steward says he'll agree that it's only half as many. Quickly, he says, write down fifty, I'll put a seal on it, and you'll walk away with half the value of your debt totally free.

And that emphasis on urgency is significant. In the plot of the story everything has to be done quickly. The paperwork needs to be falsified in a hurry, so that no-one notices that there are fake invoices lying around the place. And this all needs to happen before the steward is sacked. He's been given notice that his time is up, but before the day he departs he just has time to try to earn favour with the debtors. And he doesn't care that it's ruining his master's business. He'll be gone soon.

Everything that matters is going to happen within these few sentences. This is a feature of many of Jesus' parables. They are stories of urgency. The shepherd has to either leave the lost sheep to its fate or to set out immediately and find it. The master arrives back at the house in the middle of the night. The merchant has one chance to buy the pearl of great price. The seed which the sower scatters will either flourish this year or it will die. I think it can be easy for us to miss this, since they are stories in such a homely style. Perhaps it's more difficult to us to catch this note of crisis, because they use the imagery of everyday life in an agricultural community. We may be used to associating farmers and shepherds and grain-scattering with idyllic pastoral life, or with endless ongoing radio serials about the lives of country folk. But this is not Ambridge. For people living that life, farming did not seem a simple, quaint, slow-paced way of life. The stories demand immediate action and decision.

We find this note in a lot of Jesus' other teachings – what is called the “apocalyptic” strain in the Gospels. There is a pervasive sense that time is short, that “the axe is laid at the root of the tree”, to quote our patron saint, that history is far along and the end is imminent. We might understand that in terms of Jesus' own life, with his increasing collisions with the forces which were to have him imprisoned and executed. We might think about it in terms of the end of the world which Jesus and his disciples seem to contemplate happening soon. We might consider that urgency in terms of our own lives, feeling a sense that what we do is not trivial or pointless, but part of a hastening world of spiritual meaning. However we interpret it, that note of urgency is present here again in the reading.

Mingled with it is another theme which repeats across Jesus' parables: money. Despite these being stories about higher truths and transcendent values, money keeps coming up again and again. Last week we heard about the lost coin, and this week it is falsified accounts. Then there's the story of the widow's mite, that pearl of great price I mentioned just now, and the parable of the talents (which was originally a name for a sum of money, not an ability). The Gospels can't seem to keep off the subject. Even within this parable, we seem to move between talking about an imaginary allegorical steward, to discussing what money can and can't do in the real world. After saying that the master commended the steward for his dishonesty, Jesus remarks

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

This comment is surely ironic – the other parables and sayings make it clear that no-one can usher anyone into the eternal house of God except Jesus. This irony becomes clearer when Jesus continues his comments:

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?

So suddenly it becomes clear that money is not a metaphor here for good deeds, or truth, or temptation. It is actually money. And there are other things which have a call on our lives in this story as well as money. There are other kinds of riches we might be entrusted with, but money is also here in the tale. This is crucial to the meaning of the parable, I think. It's a typical narrative move in the Gospels, and one which is important for Christian theology and life.

If I can sum it up clumsily: this world matters. What we do matters. Christianity is a religion of the incarnation: at the very centre of our faith, at the centre of our sense of reality itself, is the figure of the incarnate Christ. He was born as a baby, lived as a human and died as a human – not like a human, the creeds and fathers are clear, but as an actual human. That point is so important that it is said that during the Council of Niceaea, St Nicholas and Arius disagreed so long and vehemently on Christ's fully human nature that Nicholas punched him in the face. Jesus was human. This means that there are beliefs which Christians cannot adopt if we want to be coherent with the orthodox tenets of the faith. We cannot proclaim that this world is an illusion, and that the only true reality is a heavenly realm of spirit. That is, technically speaking, the heresy of Gnosticism, but it's also a range of attitudes we see around us.

“Material things are fake, we can think our own reality in being, our bodies don’t matter.” Orthodox Christianity has always denied this. The world matters. Of course, we also cannot adopt the opposite position. Material things are not all of reality. The parable tells us about other riches, the true riches, and the heavenly homes. We cannot decide that spiritual matters are a myth, and that the only measure of truth is the practical and material one. Nor can we put off everything to a later date, and say that it’ll all work itself out, or that the right side of history will prevail, or that after the revolution everything will be different.

So this story, knotty and obscure as it may seem, presents us with the characteristic themes of Christian living. What we do here matters, our choices are real and immediate. Our money, our bodies and this world are pressingly real. They matter. But they are not everything – the world is in need of the presence of the transcendent God, the Ancient of Days whom we worship.

Amen.