

MONEY WORRIES

Today's parable is very tricky. Preachers run away from it – don't blame them. The clues, I believe, are found in ancient Palestinian culture so that we can discover what Jesus' listeners heard.

Jesus' peasant audience would have appreciated the situation of the manager facing ruin. Although Jesus acknowledges the manager's misconduct, he also commends his shrewdness. Jesus indicates that living in the light of the future is bound up with how we use our money and resources. The manager's motives for reducing debt are selfish. He helps customers, expecting something in return. But Jesus demands that we *not* look for reciprocation, but that we give *unconditionally* to the poor.

We are not permitted to abandon anyone within our society, including those in authority. This is not an endorsement of oppressive structures, but an invitation to stay engaged and compassionate. To live as God's children is to refuse to regard people through the labels and categories so prevalent in our society. Those at the top of our society need as much love and prayer as those at the bottom.

Nevertheless, Jesus is closer to the poor. The parable about the dishonest manager illustrates this. Without the master's knowledge, the manager reduces the debts of his bosses' customers in order to make friends with them so that they will open their homes to him once he is fired from his job. In the light of the status he holds, his actions are seen to be calculative. The manager cheats the economic system of his workplace in order to secure a stable life following his termination. It happens a lot today in Australia.

In God's community the social distinctions of rich and poor cease to exist. The kingdom ethic of relationships is grounded in love and selflessness and in equality. Giving is not one way in this story. The poor may not reciprocate with money, but they don't just receive. Jesus says that the poor welcome us into their eternal homes. They welcome us into a space where we can put down our clamour for prestige, our striving for power and our addiction to labels. The poor welcome us into the space of God's home, of true identity, where all that matters is that we are all children of God. Over and over in Scripture, God is portrayed on the side of the downtrodden and the outcast. The psalmist proclaims, 'He raises the lowly from the dust...' Psalm 113.7 Amos illustrates God's anger in the face of injustice, and assures those who 'trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land...and says never will I forget a thing they have done!' Amos 8.4,7 Jeremiah's grief is 'incurable' as he witnesses Israel's idolatry.

Again in our parable, Jesus speaks of the dangers of wealth. Jesus' central message is perfectly clear, 'You cannot serve God and money.' Luke 16.13 In a world where capital is king, placing our trust, faith and hope in a God who loves the poor and needy, is profoundly countercultural and an act of rebellion. As Christians, it is still our challenge to live kingdom values in our secular society. Never should we think or say, 'But it costs money.' We have sufficient

and more for our needs and wants and to share. And there should be enough for our church's needs if we give with cheerful hearts.

This parable is deeply embedded in Middle Eastern tradition. There are three kinds of people in the story – the manager, his master and the community. The master is informed of the steward's dishonesty and he asks his employee, 'How's it all going?' The manager answers with complete silence as he doesn't know whether the master has heard anything about *him*. After a few moments, the master realizes that he won't get anything out of the manager so he says, 'Hand over the account books.' This really means in that culture, 'You are fired.' But the manager still has the books, which represent power and authority. Yet, from now on in the story he is the ex-manager.

What did the listeners expect the manager to do? This was all a bit sudden? There usually would be days of negotiation in that culture. In the east, silence was consent and, in this story, silence is a confession of guilt. Silence isn't golden here! This master cannot be manipulated or pressured. On his way to collect the account books the manager thinks, 'What will I do? My master is taking my job away from me and I'm not strong enough for manual labour and I'm ashamed to beg.' Then the light dawns on him. 'I know, I'll summon all my master's debtors to individual private chats. That way I can maintain control, no-one will know what I actually said to each one.' Then he gives the information to his master.

The master has two choices – he can demand that the original amounts be paid in full, or, he can keep 'mum' about it and remain a generous man in the sight of everyone. However, he refrains from both. He congratulates the steward for his cleverness. 'This is a fraud; but it is a most ingenious fraud. The steward is a rascal, but a most clever rascal.' The manager's only hope was to put his entire trust in the mercy of his generous master. His morals are deplorable but Jesus wants his followers and us to trust completely in the mercy of God for our salvation and daily living. The prodigal son made a similar decision.

God is a God of justice and mercy. The coming of the kingdom brings a crisis – the manager's sins are exposed. Once caught, the manager should have repented, reformed his life and tried to make amends. But the manager is not commended for his ethics but for his accurate perception of his master's nature. We are to be economically and politically savvy, ready to use our intelligence as God's people for our good God who is on the side of the poor.

Jesus is not into 'blind faith' we are to use our brains. He simply says, 'If you're honest in small things, you will be honest in big things; if you're a crook in small things, you will be a crook in big things; if you're not honest in small jobs, who will put you in charge of the whole shop? No worker can serve two bosses; he'll either hate the first and love the second, or adore the first and despise the second.

You can't both serve God and the bank!' AMEN

