

### **St John's 18/09/22 Luke 16: 1-13**

On the day that Liz Truss was at Balmoral being asked to form a government, I and one of my fellow preachers were discussing that we were struggling to write the sermons which we should be writing, and allowing ourselves to be distracted by other 'jobs'. In the event hers was not needed and mine would have needed some rewriting. God does indeed move in mysterious ways.

Today we have another of Luke's two-part stories, and to add to the confusion, you may be feeling that you did not hear the first part correctly. But I suspect you did. The steward deceived his master about the debts owed to him, and his master congratulated him. That doesn't feel very biblical does it – or at least more- Old Testament than New Testament? How can it be right that the man cheats, stops the master reclaiming the total value of the debts and the master then congratulates him.

Apparently we need to understand the context a bit. Firstly that it was against Jewish law to lend money for interest – and they used to get round this by lending goods instead, often oil or grain. So these debts were dubious in the first place. These loans should not have been made. Secondly the amounts quoted as owed will include the 'interest' so by reducing the repayment amount the steward was then seeking only the original debt to be repaid. Now that the idea of the master congratulating him seems less impossible, and we can think about the real meaning of all this. With the debts stripped of the interest element they are legal and the master has avoided significant embarrassment.

We are told that the steward reduced the repayments in order to ingratiate himself with the debtors so that they might help him when he was dismissed from his post. It still all sounds like a story advocating dishonesty.

But there is another view on this. The steward finding that he was about to be dismissed, that his life would be turned upside-down, acts with expediency and used the means available to assist his future life. It was what expensive management courses call 'out of the box' thinking. The sort of thinking that is needed when any great change is coming – like the change from the old law based relationship with God to the love based relationship taught by Christ. Did Jesus tell this story to shock his listeners into realising that change was on its way?

I think the steward and the master both feel like some modern politicians. Someone does something a bit dubious and ends up being congratulated for it. The steward's actions are motivated by his need to be accepted and befriended.

But it does make you think about the others in the community. Those people who had their debts reduced. Could they then be guaranteed to help the steward when he became jobless and presumably also homeless? They might feel grateful for his actions but could also have thought that he only did what he should have done, why be grateful? Would they want to support someone dismissed for dishonesty? Maybe they would just think about themselves and be grateful that they now owed less.

Community is a bit of a theme in today's readings. In his letter to Timothy Paul urges him to pray for everyone, including princes, because it will help to support the community. In the psalm for today that we haven't heard this morning, the psalmist cries out to the Lord for the whole people. But we shouldn't be surprised - after all Jesus' message was for everyone, to bring people together not to divide them.

A lot has happened since my conversation about sermon block. We have a new King as well as the new Prime Minister, as a nation we wait for the funeral of our much-loved Queen. We see her family palpably grieving but having at the same time to remain in the public eye. Importantly we see a community, I suppose a community of communities, coming together to envelope a family who have lost a much-loved older member. A community trying to wrap around them to support them at this so difficult time.

And a community looking at itself and thinking 'we don't understand what the future looks like', we feel anchorless and ungrounded. At the same time, we have a need to do something – if you look at how many people have written in our book of condolences or laid flowers in St James churchyard, then multiply that by the parishes across the diocese, the country, that is an amazing number who have felt a need to somehow be part of what is happening. I know someone, unsentimental and not particularly royalist, who found it necessary to go for a ride on the Queen Elizabeth line this week.

I appreciate how lucky I have been that in leading prayers on Saturday and again on Wednesday I have been given a job, a focus, and not just left to wonder what I can do. What I should do?

There is no irony that our feeling of uncertainty has resulted from the death of someone for whom there was great certainty. We had a Queen whose faith was strong and unwavering, from that came the sense of duty and service that we saw as the continuity our lives. At the service in St Paul's on the Friday night Sarah Mullally, the Bishop of London, spoke of the power and strength to be found in coming together. A strength which we saw during the recent lockdowns in the levels of volunteering and the clapping for the NHS.

I'm still not sure how I feel about the dishonest steward in the gospel, do I want him to be taken in by his community and supported through his difficulties, or do I feel an element of 'getting what he deserved'.

I do know that significant changes will be coming to our lives, some will need us to think 'outside the box', some may make us feel anchorless but if we follow the Queen's example and put our faith in the God who does not change we will be able to weather those changes. There is power and strength in our coming together with God and with each other.