

Sometimes our Sunday readings are straightforward. We may still find them challenging, but at least we're fairly clear on what is being challenged. This week in our gospel reading we have a parable that is not so straightforward. One commentator describes it as consistently baffling to scholars. Another writer suggests that this parable is so perplexing, there are probably as many interpretations as there are readers. Maybe a better idea to focus on one of the other readings instead? But with a parable described as baffling and perplexing, it would hardly be a sporting decision for the preacher to ignore it. So let's wade into this together, hopefully with ears to hear what God might speak to us through it.

The parable centres on the relationship of a rich man and the manager of his property who, rumour has it, has been dishonest. The rich man becomes aware of whatever questionable business has been taking place and demands an accounting. The manager must act quickly if he's going to keep himself in the manner to which he has become accustomed. He's no taste for manual labour and to be reduced to begging would be humiliating. But perhaps there is a way forward! In the limited time he has, he risks it all on one final gamble. He will try to curry favour with his master's debtors—at least then, perhaps, they'd look out for him after he got fired, put in a good word for him if some other middle management position opened up down the road. He sets about his plan, to reduce the record of the debts, surely a windfall for all the debtors and an outrage for the rich man who has now lost out on some of his profit. That's what you'd expect, outrage, and the dishonest manager thrown into prison. Most astonishingly, the rich man commends the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly. He seems to admire the action taken by this chancer! We are in for more astonishment when we exit the parable to receive Jesus' interpretation, which also seems to signal approval of the behaviour of the dishonest manager.

How are we supposed to unpack this? Who's the hero? Who's the villain? What's the message? What's the moral of the story here?

Shrewdness and dishonesty in regards to money are the themes around which the action forms. When we begin the story, we might be inclined to give the rich man some sympathy. After all he has been cheated by his employee. One explanation for the manager's tactic of reducing the recorded debt was that he was really reducing the amount taken on interest, and interest—or usury—was prohibited in the Jewish law anyway. So if the debt reduced was an interest payment, the rich man could hardly kick up a fuss if he was benefiting by ill-gotten gains in the first place.

While we may find intriguing the idea of the thieving manager as a Robin Hood character, it seems clear in the story that his dishonest dealings are only to look after himself; he has no larger justice agenda in view. So leaving aside the technicalities of Jewish law, we are left with a character who is doing something intentionally underhanded, with the hope of securing his own future benefit. While we might have pitied him if he had come clean and asked for forgiveness for his previous wrongs, his scheming means he doesn't come across as noble. And as for the rich man, whatever sympathies may have remained for him go out the window when he expresses his admiration for the manager's dishonest and cheating strategy. If he's praising that type of behaviour he can't be a very upright person himself! And if that's the sort of boss he is, well then he deserves a dishonest

manager. Let them carry on in business together, each keeping an eye on the other to see who ends up the biggest cheat.

If you're having a hard time finding the moral of this story, then Jesus' concluding remark probably isn't making it any easier: 'the children of this age are more shrews in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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.' What? What does he mean? You can use money to buy your way into God's favour or 'eternal homes'? What exactly are eternal homes anyway? Does that mean even if you come by money dishonestly you just need to use it in the right way? It's no problem being deceitful, if you have a heavenly end goal in sight?

Parables don't stand in isolation, and this is definitely one that needs some wider context. Across Luke's gospel, there is plenty to be said about wealth and money. We meet rich and poor characters and in general the rich don't receive a favourable evaluation from Jesus.

In ch 12 there is a parable about a 'rich fool' who builds bigger and bigger barns to hoard his abundant crops, but he died before he could enjoy any of it. Jesus gives a warning about enriching oneself, rather than being rich towards God.

In ch 18, a rich young ruler who hesitates to do as Jesus instructs: sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. At the young man's reluctance Jesus comments 'how hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'

In ch 21, Jesus expresses his admiration for the poor widow who donates her two copper coins at the temple, over others who have actually given more money, because she gave something that was truly sacrificial.

Across Luke, all earthly wealth is characterised as 'dishonest', one scholar observes, in that material possessions become the object's of one's trust and 'therefore encourage an acquisitive attitude and a self-reliance; [wealth] separates one from God.'

And perhaps in this parable Jesus is also being a bit tongue in cheek, pitting these two unsavoury, money-grubbing characters—the dishonest manager and the rich man who approves and dishonest business savy—against each other. One writer observes: 'there is no way to be honest in a system that is already excessively unjust and dishonest'. Another observer suggests 'the master appreciated the fact that he had been outwitted by a smart rogue and paid his tribute to the wisdom, though not the morality, of the act.' Perhaps in crafting this scenario, Jesus is really showing up the shameful reality of his time of the glorification of wealth and admiring those who are able to acquire it by whatever means. Jesus could just as easily be speaking into our own time. It is worth noting that the eternal 'homes' that Jesus refers to might be better translated as eternal 'tents'. The image then is not piling up wealth or merit to gain entry into an eternal mansion, but something more resonant with the scriptural idea of God's people as a pilgrim people, of wanderers and strangers on the earth seeking to walk according to God's way, even if this puts them at odds with the prevailing culture.

And the friends who will welcome you along this way are often not the rich and powerful, but the humble.

While there is no time to dwell on it, we can't help but notice the complementary theme present in the reading from Amos. The prophet decries the mis-treatment and cheating of the poor in the marketplace. The word that Amos spoke in his time was a word of final judgement of God against the people of Israel. Jesus, the Word of God, speaks to us in a different style, using parables, like this morning's to challenge and to provoke reflection, making room for the Spirit to bring the word alive in our hearts. May we be faithful to enter into this process of dynamic reflection and open to change, that we may act wisely in the world; resourceful, but not dishonest; with focus on that which is of eternal value.