

Lord Jesus by the power of your Holy Spirit, as we ponder your life and meaning, help us to live with our feet on the ground and our hearts in heaven. Amen

- Is it fair?
- Is it fair when the queue you join in the supermarket is held up by someone ahead of you buying a melon that has no bar code whereas the next door one which you carefully assessed as longer dissolves like sugar in tea?
- Is it fair railway employees and airline staff choose the busiest times of year to strike when hundreds of ordinary people are going to be disrupted? You worked hard all year – all you want is a couple of weeks in the sun.
- Is it fair that someone in Cornwall has to wait 18 months for their operation whereas the waiting lists in Hertfordshire are only 3 months?
- Is it fair that you can't get your child into the outstanding school in the next town because it's oversubscribed with people apparently travelling miles.
- What's fair in all that?
- And if you use your influence or your power to make things fairer for you, what does that say about the person in the same boat who is not nearly as perceptive or well-placed as you to get what they deserve?
- *'the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.'* So says Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning.
- There's a problem with parables. Our first impulse is to treat them as allegories and immediately start to assign parts to them. When we hear about a king, we automatically think that this must be God who Jesus is talking about. When we hear about other humans who apparently get it right, it's natural to start thinking that this is a blueprint for how we should be acting.
- And sometimes that works. But sometimes it leads us to peculiar conclusions that just don't seem right.
  - And today is one of those times!
- The manager, the servant of the rich man, writes off some of the rich man's debts out of self-interest, to make friends in case he loses his job. And the rich man commends him for it. Does that sound like God?
- Perhaps the rich man is pleased because the debts, which were huge – apparently the amount of wheat and olive oil owed was roughly equivalent to a year's production on a small farm – perhaps the rich man is pleased because he is getting something back on unpayable debts. But actually that doesn't sound like God either. We have a God who writes off our debts, rather than extorting from us what he can. That's the Gospel. The Good News. Jesus died and rose again to pay off our debt, our sin, our fallen nature, our worldly economics.
  - And what of the curious verse, *'make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes'*?
  - It sounds like an invitation to be a little crafty financially and not always to be strictly honest.
- So perhaps, instead of this parable being an allegory where God is the rich man and we are the dishonest manager, it is more a comment on the way the world works and challenging us to some conclusions as a result?
- Perhaps Jesus is saying, this is how it is, both in First Century Palestine and in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. Places where the rich get richer and the poor, those with unpayable debts seem to be unnamed pawns in the game, taken for whatever can be extorted from them. "OK, so you can't pay a hundred jugs of olive oil. Of course you can't, it's a year's income for you. How much do you think you can cope with? Fifty? Well pay it quick and I'll have a word with the boss. That's only six months' income for a subsistence farmer, so that's fine then."
- And that's basically the economics of the world today. And if you have money and use it wisely you'll get more unless you're very unlucky. Say, the top 1% of earners should fall within this category?
  - Whereas if you are on the bread line you're usually pretty stuffed.
  - And if you have the misfortune to live in a land where life is unstable, where war and civil disobedience threaten, where there are few resources, then even more so.
- Are you within the top 1% of earners worldwide?

- According to the Global Rich List, a website that brings awareness to worldwide income disparities, an income of £25 900 a year will put you in the top 1%. So if you're an accountant, a registered nurse, a teacher or even a Rector, congratulations. The average wage for any of these careers falls well within the top 1% worldwide.
- But that's how it is, and the rich man and his crafty manager know how to play the system to their advantage so they come out on top. The rich man gets most of what he's owed rather than nothing because his debtors couldn't pay the debts. The squandering manager presumably kept his job and certainly made some friends among local farmers. And the local farmers become just so much parable fodder.
- *'the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light'.*
- "Ah yes," we all nod sagely, "I'm glad I'm not like that. Why only last week I gave £20 to Help the Aged. ... ." "Was it last week, or was it last month? I can't remember. Well it was sometime in the last year anyway."
- "And I've got my pension. They invest it wisely. I've no idea how much is invested in the tobacco industry or arms manufacturers, but you can't check everything can you. And I've got my retirement to think about."
- *'the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light'.*
- Can it be that Jesus is saying, the children of this age understand how the world works and use it to their advantage. Why do the 'children of light' – that's you and me remember – why do 'the children of light' not understand the ways of the kingdom of God?
- So how often do you deal with dishonest wealth?
  - *'If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?'*
- And before you wash your metaphorical hands and assume this does not apply to you because you are always scrupulously honest in your tax return, let the scary last sentence of this reading sink into your psyche a little.
  - *'You cannot serve God and wealth.'*
- We've been talking about the economics of the world. What about the economics of the Kingdom of God?
- For Luke, money is all dishonest. It is not our world. It is not our money,. We are just custodians.
  - *'If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?'*
- Use your 'dishonest wealth', your money, your power, your influence, pull those strings, all those things which are legal but unfair, in kingdom ways rather than hoarding them for yourself.
  - And put like this, the economics of the Kingdom of God seem to imply spending your money rather than saving it. But spending it to do good, to make friends rather than to protect your own interest.
- After all you only have to read on a few verses from today's reading to discover the truth that you can't take it with you anyway. Is that fair?
- Is it fair that peasants on the other side of the world are threatened with flood and tsunami because you and I don't want to spend a premium on buying locally produced food that isn't transported thousands of miles?
- Is it fair that poor people in oil rich nations in the Middle East get much more international aid than those in impoverished nations that have no resources for the rich to plunder?
- Is it fair that there are more homeless in Britain today, more people using Foodbanks more child poverty than ever. Surely these figures, even in a stagnant economy should be reducing rather than increasing.
  - *'If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?'*
- Somehow a long queue at the supermarket or a delay at the airport, or even, what school your child goes to pales into insignificance beside some of these questions. And these are Kingdom economics.
- But we are stuck with the economics of the world. You have to budget. You have a savings account. The Church has to budget. The Church has a savings account. We can't just spend it all willy-nilly can we? The roof would fall in!
- I'm not sure the parable gives many answers to you and I, who even if we are not in the top 1% of earners worldwide are almost certainly be in the top 10%. But what the parable certainly does do is to encourage us to wrestle with the questions. And if in the wrestling it prompts you to feel a bit uncomfortable, then you might be one step closer to Kingdom economics than world economics. Is this fair?
- In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen?