

Good from bad

Luke 16:1-8

Rev J Shannon

Here we are deep in Luke's reporting of the parables. So far, we have heard that the divine seeks us and enthusiastically celebrates finding the lost ones. We have learnt that no matter what the story, Jesus turns the tables and offers the unexpected.

And we have been puzzled by some of the more complex stories that just don't sit right with us. For example, there's prodigal son – it just doesn't seem fair, does it? Or the maidens that won't share their oil and the unforgiving bride groom. Those words still echo in my ear, when the bridegroom came to the door and the maidens begged to come in, he said, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you."¹ Harsh!

Is it all part of a wily plot to keep us confused? Is there a secret language that from a 21st century mindset we just cannot fathom?

Well, good news, folks. I've been reading up on the *Parable of the shrewd servant* and guess what? The scholars say, and I quote, "this is the strangest and most difficult parable". Hooray, we are not alone. There are scribbles in the margins of ancient Christian texts showing how disciples and monks tried to 'solve' this parable. And each took a different path -traditionally, they settled on 3 major paths and we're not going down any of them.

That doesn't mean we can't make sense of it...as I plan to do if you'll bear with me. But first, we have to put aside two very invasive assumptions.

1. The main character in the parables is *not* always God. It is in some and not in others – so don't generalise. When the maidens cry out, "Lord, Lord, let us in..."they may well be speaking to the Lord of the house, not the Lord on high! The rich man in this story *may not* be God and that changes a lot of things.
2. We tend to look at these economic exchanges as ancient acts of modern capitalism...but that is not the system used in the day. True, this was a time just like today, where small family farms were disappearing. Agriculture was commercialising. The small farms were being acquired through debt. I loan you some money (to pay for taxes or buy seeds) and you pay me back with interest. The interest keeps going up so ultimately, the only way you can pay me back is with a small parcel

¹ (Matthew 25)

of your land. Your land is then less productive or you have a bad year and the cycle repeats until the rich man owns another farm. The prayer ‘forgive us our debts’ is not an idle prayer but rather a peasant’s plea.

BUT and that’s a big but, The Torah is very clear – you cannot charge interest on money.² So how do they do it? They pay in produce that is then on-sold. Note the Rich man is not called a farmer. And we will come back to the manager’s role in all this, I promise.

But first, I want to digress. I mentioned the parable of the prodigal son when I started and that is because these two stories have much in common. In the Greek version, both stories start with “There was a certain man”- in other words, their story-telling form was the same – people knew what to expect. If I start a story with “once upon a time”, you’d expect a fairy tale.

Both characters squander what has been entrusted to them and both face life threatening situations. The Son is starving to death. The manager without the protection of his master is homeless and unemployable.³ The father’s forgiveness is as unexpected as is the Master actually complimenting the manager for cheating him. How can that be?

Because sometimes good things come out of bad.

Now back to the manager’s role. The manager is not a slave because he can be dismissed. He is a trusted ...and this is where we struggle with 20th century ideas because we don’t have a word for this relationship. He was not an employee but he was in the employ of the master. He manages the property, sells the produce, trades and made loans and collects debts on behalf of his master. He was permitted a percentage of graft...that was his salary, really. He just added his bit to the debt or took it from the debt owing. Now he could get greedy and add or take 50% but usually settled for 25% interest of the debt. That is, when collecting for the master, he was taking 25% to what had to be paid back...in goods. What happened here, is he got greedy and so the account “adjustments” virtually eliminated his master’s profit. That’s how he got caught.

² Exodus 22:25-27; Leviticus 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 23:19-20

³ Based on readings from *Reimagine the world*, Bernard Brandon Scott p. 88

In the Greek, he is not caught, he is called to account with a word that is translated as “accused”. But the word really means slander. The word diabolic comes from the same Greek root. The devil is the one who lies. He is accused of more than dishonesty.

Now there are some very specific accounting details here that I will not go into right now but to say this parable was not made up on the spot or thrown together. The commodities and per centages are intentionally accurate.

The master sacks the manager. The manager decides to get even and he does this by cutting the master’s profit – and also his own. In his revenge, he gives mercy to the debtors. God’s justice gets accomplished in spite of their intentions.

Remember the rich farmer that had such a great year⁴ he decided to build more grain silos and take it easy for a while? But the parable tells us, God took him up to heaven that very same day so he never got to spend his riches. Well, think of him as a modern Joseph with a coat of many colours. Ok he got lazy and did wrong but I’ll bet his community were able to call on those silos in times of need and they probably appreciated someone building them. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was celebrated as a hero and they named the town after him. He didn’t mean to be generous but that was the outcome. And by the way, the terrible action of selling Joseph into slavery turned out to be his brother’s salvation. You can see where I’m going.

God’s will is stronger than human intentions. It may well be accomplished in circumstances where it is hard to see. Brandon Scott said it is powerful and impossible to watch like yeast or leaven. We see the outcome but not the process. So in a way, their debts were almost forgiven – or at least, made lighter.

Sometimes, God’s will – will be done – despite us. Amen.

⁴ Luke 12:16-20