

Are you a Shrewd Manager? Luke 16:1-13

Readings: Malachi 3:8-12, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 16:1-13

"Money so they say, is the root of evil today.

But if you ask them for a rise its no surprise

that they are giving none away." Roger Waters of Pink Floyd

Our sermon today cannot help but bring up the subject of money, filthy lucre, unrighteous mammon. Now even as we start the sermon some may be thinking this is simply not appropriate, firstly we have to listen to Pink Floyd in church and then to have to think about money. Surely we should be setting our minds on higher things.

Jesus however did not think so, he often taught about what we should do with that which many of us sit on, our wallets. Indeed told a story which in many ways seems inappropriate to teach about our attitude to money, how we are to use the resources that have been entrusted to us. We like the dishonest steward need to think, knowing what we know, "What shall I do now?"

UNDERSTANDING THE PASSAGE

The Story

The story that Jesus told is of a man who has a manager to run the business for him, a common thing in those days. The manager would usually act with the full authority of the master and looked after all his interests. Yet this particular manager was looking after his own interests for he was accused of misusing the master's possessions. This accusation is never disputed in the story so I think we can assume the man is guilty, he is bent, dishonest on the take, sadly something we continue to see all to often..

So the master calls his manager to give account of himself before being given the boot. This creates rather a problem for the manager because he almost certainly lived at the master's house and at the master's expense. So to lose his job was to be unemployed, homeless and hungry simultaneously.

He evaluates his position, he hasn't lost his job yet, but he knows he will. "What shall I do now?" he asks himself. The options of digging and begging are unthinkable and those listening would have agreed. Then he hatches a plan that will put people in his debt.

Whilst he still is in his position of manager he calls in the debtors of his master and he renegotiates the deals in a way that is very favourable for the debtors. The amounts involved are substantial. There is much discussion in the commentaries as to whether the manager has previously overcharged them or if he was discounting excessive interest, we simply don't know and it also doesn't really help us understand the story any better. As he is called dishonest and is a waster I think he knows that what he is doing is not kosher but crafty.

His scheme is very clever for had he simply taken some money then the master could have taken legal proceedings to recover it. But here he has legally transferred

some of the master's property to a third party, so the master has no recourse to reclaim the money. The manager now, in a society that understood reciprocal obligations, is assured of having people who will give him a place to stay and food to eat when he finally loses his job. He has used them in such a way that he is owed a favour. The master cannot touch him and now he will have places to sleep and food to eat. He has managed to use his current situation and resources in a way that will be helpful to him when the inevitable occurs.

The master applauds his shrewd behaviour. Now it is at this point many have taken issue with the story, especially those who may have been ripped off by sharp business practices. How can the master praise the dishonest or literally unrighteous steward? We need to note that the master does not say that the manager did the right thing, a good thing, rather that he acted shrewdly, he was clever.

I think we understand this. We all like heist movies like "Oceans 11" or shows like "Hustle" as clever villains pull off elaborate scams. We know that it is dishonest but you cannot but admire the schemes. I remember hearing a few years ago of the trial of a man in Brisbane for selling an office block which he didn't own and netting \$5 million. Now I don't want to encourage such behaviour but you have to admire his audacity. This is what the master is commending, the use of resources in the available time to be of true benefit in the future.

Now Jesus makes his application. "for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest [or literally "unrighteous"] wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." (Luke 16:8-9, NRSV).

Interpretation

Wrong interpretations

It would be wrong to think this is recommending dishonest business practices, after all the guy still loses his job. Also Jesus condemns dishonesty in the next few verses.

Nor is this about earning your way into heaven for Jesus is speaking to those already on the inside to the saved. It is not so much gaining salvation but encourage others to share it, gaining friends, establishing long lasting, even eternal relationships.

It would also be wrong however to read this passage as in some way not relevant to our money. The whole Chapter is about using our money wisely in the light of the Kingdom. Clearly this passage will impact our wallets and bank balances.

Stewards

If this is not what Jesus is teaching, what is he teaching? Firstly he is reminding his disciples that they are stewards of all that God has entrusted to them. This is plain in the parable and in the teaching that comes after about being trusted with much and little. Both assume that the property doesn't belong to the disciples.¹

In reminding his hearers that they are stewards brings the necessary corollary that they will be held accountable for all that they have been entrusted with. There is a day of reckoning coming and Jesus' followers must act accordingly.

The need to be shrewd

But most importantly he is teaching his followers to be shrewd. A day is coming, whether our death or judgment day when all our worldly wealth will completely devalued. In that light we should ask the same question as the steward "What now shall I do?" and we should answer it shrewdly. We like the manager have limited time and

¹ Jesus may be teaching this now because of the story of the prodigal son which he has just told. In that story the son squanders his inheritance (15:13) and yet is welcomed home. A possible interpretation for the followers of Jesus was that they can squander their wealth and it doesn't matter, God will welcome them home anyway. To give balance Jesus teaches about a manager who squanders his master's property and suffers the consequences. In the presence of tax collectors and "sinners" he tells a story which they would have well understood, in fact may have seen themselves in.

resources entrusted to us what can we do with them now which will survive that coming day. All that will survive will be those things of the Kingdom so what can we do now to build up the Kingdom and build up Kingdom relationships.

This strange story then is a positive call to manage and employ those resources that we have been entrusted with in a manner which builds the community of the kingdom. We can convert our worldly currency into relationship values which will survive the total devaluation of the last day.

APPLYING THE PASSAGE: WHAT SHALL WE DO NOW?

This leads us to the rather direct question “Are you a shrewd steward?” How wise are you being with the resources entrusted to you? Am I a shrewd steward? We always should be asking in the light of the Gospel “what will I do now”, in the time we have how should we use the resources that we have.

As the Cathedral

We need to ask this as the Cathedral. We have been entrusted with great resources here and they have not always been well handled, as per this Mercury headline from 1999.

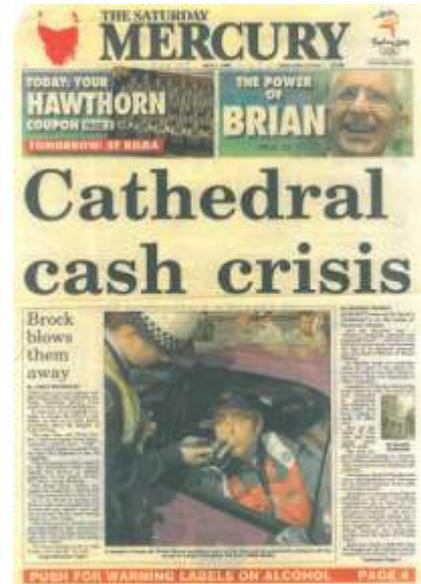
Since then we have been blessed to have received two significant bequests which have put our finances in better order with reserves of around \$2 million. But we cannot just feel good about this we need to be shrewd with what has been entrusted to us. The income from these reserves in the current economic climate is not a huge amount, especially compared to ministry costs. We also need to be prepared to spend some of this for the sake of the Kingdom and for promoting the Gospel in the city of Hobart. We have put \$150,000 for supporting the Senior Assistant position for three years which has started to bear fruit. But it also means being generous with the resources that we have in both staff and buildings for the Diocese and other Christian groups.

Furthermore the financial aim of the Cathedral Chapter is that people pay for people, that is giving through offertory pays for the ministry staff. Long term this means increasing our offertory in coming years by 50%. As I note in the pewsheet the best way for that to happen is for more people to attending and contributing. But we can all play our part. For instance, whilst being \$8000 behind on budget may seem alarming, with over 100 people regularly attending the Cathedral that shortfall could have been dealt with if everyone gave simply \$2 extra a week. If everyone gave \$5 a week, the price of a good cup of coffee, we would have \$26,000 for the work of the Gospel. It is shrewd for us to ask that you consider your giving.

Personally

So as we think more personally how do you think about your giving? Are you being shrewd in the perspective of the Gospel, whether that be to the Cathedral or to other Christian mission?

In the Old Testament the Israelites were to give 10% of their income and some use this as a base line. Do you give 10% of your income? Could you? What would stop you from giving 10%? Have you worked out what percentage you do give? I am not saying that tithing is necessary and it is not up to me to tell you how much you



should give but it is worth us thinking about. Clearly from our Old Testament reading God expects his people to give.

Do you have a plan? You can use our offertory envelopes or internet giving to help to keep you regular. It is also perhaps worth asking is it sacrificial or is it simply money that you don't really notice? The Scriptures certainly teach that it is not the size of the donation which matters but the cost to the giver. If our money says "Don't give me away or it will hurt", who is really in control. As Jesus says you can only truly serve one master.

But there are wider issues than just Church work. Francis Bacon said "Money is like muck, not good except it be spread." And there are many ways to spread it. The Bible encourages us to show the compassion of God by caring for the poor, the story which follows this parable mandates it. We are to be generous to the needy, perhaps through sponsoring a child or through Anglicare.

There is also simply personal generosity. Spike Milligan said "Money doesn't buy friends but it certainly buys a better class of enemy" but using the money entrusted to us shrewdly, wisely, lovingly, through hospitality and generosity we can create not bought acquaintances but valued friends. This can be a wonderful way to help build the community of the church and welcoming people into it.

Shrewd Stewardship

In all this giving we are being shrewd stewards.

For a start there are benefits that come to us, generosity has its own rewards. Those who receive are likely to give thanks to God as well as the giver. Others are likely to be encouraged by the seeing the fruits of generosity, Paul would regularly be encouraged by the generosity of others and would also use it to encourage others to give. Both our Old Testament and Epistle readings remind us that God is well able to supply the resources for us to keep on giving. Our faith grows and deepens as we give. It is a good investment to be generous.

Secondly of course it is wise to remind ourselves that we are only stewards. Ultimately nothing is ours, and certainly nothing will remain ours. Everything we have comes from God, our money, our skill, our time our lives all come from God and we are stewards of them and will be held accountable. It's Lent ... so we're giving it back.

All that we have looked at over the past few weeks, Scripture, Study, Supplication, Silences, Serving, Sharing, Stewardship are a response to reminding ourselves that we are God's people in God's world and being shrewd, it is investing that reality.

Finally Lent points us forward to Easter where we see that a God who is rich in mercy and self giving. Paul as he encourages the Corinthians to be generous says "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2Corinthians 8:9) It is as we grasp these true riches that we have in Christ, the outrageous generosity of God, that we will be the cheerful givers that God desires for we will be joyfully following in the steps of our Lord Saviour.

As we come towards Easter we will sing:

We the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far to small
Love so amazing so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

As we understand this what then shall we do?