

9th Sunday after Trinity, St Barnabas Church, Oxford

Numbers 10.35-11.3; 1 Corinthians 10.1-13; Luke 16.1-9

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+In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

It's been said that parables are a lot like jokes, if you need to have them explained, don't bother! This is quite true. But I think an even better parallel to the parable is the poem.

When we grow up in school we are taught to read poems in exam mode: decipher the metaphor, find the hidden meaning. And so the poem becomes like a puzzle to figure out, a riddle in which to find the answer, and we miss the whole point. The main purpose of a poem, if it needs one, is not to disseminate information, but to *move* somewhere, so that the reader ends up in a different place than they started. The same could be said of parables.

Parables move us along so that we enter into a certain relationship with the subject matter, so that we take part in the story, and in the end become not only hearers but doers of the word.

In fact, we can go as far to say that parables work directly against the sort of puzzle-solving method of theology that pretends God can be figured out. They rid us of the assumption that we have it all in hand, that our knowledge of God is complete. They remind us that God continually surprises us, and that we must be ready to open up to what God's love is doing and will do—that we must be ready to *move*.

If you need any proof that parables are not meant to be codes to decipher or puzzles to be solved, this morning's gospel reading is surely sufficient evidence. It seems to make entirely no sense at all. Over the

years it has entertained a plethora of interpretations so that there really is no confident and certain one.

Now, I am not saying this so that I can then proceed to say whatever I want about it and get away with it! I am saying it to encourage us to step back a bit, gain a wider scope, so we can then move along with this parable in the direction Christ might be nudging us.

I think to make sense of the story we need to see how it fits in Luke's overall presentation of the life of Jesus. Throughout his Gospel, Luke gives us a picture of how God's economy works differently than ours, and how we are invited to be participants in God's economy of grace.

And in this parable we perhaps get a glimpse of how this economy of Christ's kingdom works—not through the actions of the steward, but through his *aim*. In verse 4 the steward says to himself, 'I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, *they may receive me into their houses*'. He is losing his status, his livelihood, and what will save him is relationships of equality and friendship: being welcomed at the table. And the way this works, the way this society of equitable friends is created is through the forgiveness of debt; through generosity and gift. The table is broadened, the door is open, equality is acknowledged, through generous giving.

And Jesus draws us into the broader picture of kingdom economics at the end of our reading when he claims that the 'children of this world' are wiser than the 'children of light'. It is as if he is saying, 'look at this shrewd steward, for example, the children of this world know how their system works, and they know how to use and even abuse it for their advantage. Why do the children of light not understand how God's kingdom works?'

For Luke, and indeed, for all of Scripture, wealth and resources are meant for welcome; for generosity and table fellowship, a theme that surfaces in our reading from 1 Corinthians as well. Wealth is not meant to exclude, to 'other' people, to marginalise those without it, but rather to expand the community and invite others in.

And Luke in particular, alongside Jesus, is concerned that resources be redistributed to those who cannot pay anything in return—those who cannot pay their debts; who cannot return an invitation to *their* table. Christ already earlier in the Gospel told his disciples, 'if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again'.

Why is Luke, why is Jesus, so keen to draw us out of the world's endless saga of exchange? Because this is about the economics of the Kingdom, and God's economic strategy works differently than ours: there is no investment. There is only pure gift. And how else could it be? God lacks nothing. There is nothing that God could desire from us in return because God has no needs. Yet God gives, continuously, purely and only through freely choosing to; purely and only out of love.

It's a bad investment! God would be the worst business owner or deal maker in the world. God's is an economy not based on consumption, or net gain, or competition, but pure gift. Pure gift that creates a fellowship of equal friends, a society of people who gather at the same table, who are nourished by the same food. Gift creates a community of equals because true gift does not say, 'I've given you this, now I demand that in return', there is no tit-for-tat, no exchange, just simply welcome. Just *invitation*.

Through all of this, Jesus is ultimately telling us what kind of Father God is. Through other parables like that of the prodigal son in the

previous chapter, through a lesson here in the economics of God's kingdom, Jesus is showing us that God is a God who welcomes us at the table; that God is a wasteful, lavish, senseless, squanderer of love, who continuously showers affection on those who throw it away, and those who have nothing to give in exchange.

And Jesus doesn't just talk about this economy, he lives it out, perfectly. God does not remain far off but shows up, God comes to us, and in Jesus Christ makes this economy of gift truly alive in our world. And so we can look to Jesus and see what this lavish, senseless, wasteful love that receives nothing in return looks like.

When God shows up in the humility of the manger, in the streets and at table with tax collectors and sinners and outcasts. When God shows up in Christ to embrace the suffering and the insufferable, giving himself over as gift into every aspect of our world; when God shows up in Christ and gives himself over as gift even into the darkest corners of our sorrow, our shame, our fear, even unto death, looking for absolutely nothing in return, we begin to see what true love is really like.

Because if God's love meets us even in our darkest moments, even in death, there is no place we can escape it. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a bold and unambiguous statement: no one and nowhere is beyond the reach of God's love. No matter who you are or what you've done or what's been done to you, and no matter that you have nothing of any value to give in return, you are loved. *You* are loved.

And so we come now to the altar, gathered round the same table as a community of equal friends, not because what we have to offer has any buying power in God's economy, but to feed freely on the gift of endless love and grow forevermore into children of light.