

25th Sunday (C)

18th September 2022

‘Win yourselves friends in eternity!’

Amos 8: against those who swindle the poor

Ps 112: *from the dungheap He raises the poor*

1Tim 2: *there should be prayers offered ... for kings and others in authority*

Lk 16: 1–13: *the children of this world are more astute than children of the light*

It’s sometimes said that you can prove *anything* with the Bible if you really want to. In other words, whatever position you might want to hold, or defend, you can find somewhere a Scripture line that supports it! I think it’s true — taken out of context, individual verses of Holy Scripture can sometimes seem to support all sorts of bizarre ideas and opinions. Take, for example, Our Lord’s own words in the middle of that Gospel passage this morning, “*And so, I tell you this: use money, tainted as it is, to win you friends.*” Taken at face value, it sounds like Jesus is telling us get stuck in to briberies, sweeteners, financial incentives, ‘buying favours,’ and all sorts of corruption, “to win you friends.” And anyway, doesn’t that seem to complement the parable which preceded it, “*The master praised the dishonest steward*”? What is going on here, and what is Jesus actually saying?

A golden rule of Scriptural interpretation is that the

meaning of a bible passage has to be consistent with the whole thrust of the faith. Vatican II said this very clearly in its document on Divine Revelation:

“since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind, no less attention must be devoted to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith, if we are to derive their true meaning from the sacred texts.”

In other words, God as the divine author of Scripture cannot contradict Himself — and Jesus’s words, His every word, in fact, can only ever be consistent with the whole of Christian teaching, and *vice versa*. So, let’s go back to the parable, and His words about using “money, tainted as it is, to win you friends.”

Today’s is not a straightforward parable, but a rather subtle and perplexing one, about the dishonest steward who ‘batters up’ some of his master’s clients before he’s dismissed from office; he garners support around him with

a bit of relief on oil and wheat debts. Why, we wonder, does the master in Jesus's story seem to *praise* this dishonest steward?

Well, if you notice, the master in Jesus's parable doesn't actually praise the steward for his wastefulness or his dishonesty, but for his "*astuteness*," his cunning and initiative as he plans for the future and saves his skin. Jesus's point is that we have all ways of behaving, day-in, day-out, which show our enormous capacity for inventiveness and adaptation in achieving worldly ends. We do use our cunning and our initiative, just like that steward: as human beings we have an enormous resourcefulness to get things done ... It's just that, are the things we pour time and effort into the most important things in life? I'm sure we can think of lots of occasions when we've spent inordinate amounts of time on things that are not that crucial. I remember last year spending days trying to find a better deal on my car insurance. Or, once, some time back, I spent hours and hours getting a better tariff for my mobile phone. We can easily go out of

our way for these *little* things. Sometimes we insist on going back to another shop because we saw something cheaper there than it is right here in front of us. There are all sorts of ways in which we are astute in the things of the world, and give them huge attention. It's not that they're necessarily bad things as such; it's just that we are prone to giving more time to the less important things in life. If only we used an equal measure of zeal and application to our eternal life, saving our lives for eternal happiness. We spend so much time planning our lives on earth; let's be as determined to plan also for our future with God.

The key to interpreting Christ's Gospel teaching, this morning, is the context: "*use money, tainted as it is, to win you friends, and thus make sure that when it fails you, they will welcome you into the tents of eternity.*" We know that money takes up so much of our time and our worries: whether you're a **student** trying to make ends meet, get the fees and your accommodation covered — or get a grant to start a research degree ... or whether you're **running a student chaplaincy**, trying to get the budget to balance

and bring in enough money to keep the fabric together and the bills paid ... or whether you're a **recent graduate** concerned about moving into the world of work where your degree will help your job prospects so you can rent a flat, pay the bills, and begin your life ... Our money worries are unlikely to go away! Think on the grander scale, too, of the *country*, how the state in recent years has had to cover the enormous economic and healthcare costs of the **pandemic** (furloughing and vaccine development etc.) ... and then the costs of helping the **Ukraine** defend itself against military invasion ... and now the bill for helping households and businesses bear the brunt of colossal rises in **energy costs**. Who knows how many years it will take to pay off all those billions? And yet, Our Lord constantly relativizes these problems, contrasting money, "that tainted thing," with "genuine riches." However great the world's economy, or the greatest of luxury living, yet they don't come close to comparing with "genuine riches." Perhaps because we spend so much of our day-to-day thinking about money, the 'getting and

spending,' we can forget the honest truth, that money is merely a passing, earthly, concern, and won't help us store up treasure in eternity, will it? Let's face it, we're taking none of those earthly riches with us, are we?

I think that there's also another dimension to this parable today, and it has to do with '*mixed motives*.' The parable is very reminiscent of the reality of human life, which is complex, can be messy, and in which we can have mixed motives in much of what we do. The steward has been dishonest; but here he is 'making friends' through some generous discounts, a little bit of 'creative accountancy'! It might remind us of our own 'mixed motives' and the incentives we employ to get things done, or sometimes the ways in which we use our money. When we're first in love with someone, for example, we might spend lavishly and perhaps foolishly — from our insecurity we try and impress our friend. And yet whilst money doesn't buy love, as we know, the spending itself needn't actually take away from the genuineness of that love, and that relationship may mature very happily. Or: we might

give regularly to a homelessness charity, so as to assuage our conscience about the beggars we see on the London streets — maybe it's not such a pure act of love, but, still, there's nothing wrong with it either. Doesn't Jesus say, "use your money to win yourselves friends *in eternity*"! We can use money, "that tainted thing" in all sorts of good ways, even if sometimes our heart may not be 100% purely behind it. We need to do the good anyway!

We are complex creatures, but God knows us through and through, and encourages us even in our mixed motives, to work for the good. Sometimes we may have to coerce ourselves into doing what is right. Even if in our friendship with God we feel sometimes forced by circumstances, or by tragedy, or by guilt, or by Church rules, yet the true goodness of God can win us over fully: He can purify our intentions, and eventually bring us to love Him freely and purely for Himself. God made us and knows us, and is aware even more than we are ourselves of our efforts to be good and holy, or our lack of effort. Above all, the Lord is merciful. Let's not get down over

the mixed efforts of our Christian lives ... but let's hang in there, offering to the Lord what we do, what we can, and little by little a bit more. Let's not settle for a mediocre (and pointless) life of "getting and spending"; let's make sure that we are gradually "laying up treasure for eternity." May the good Lord, our greatest friend in the tents of eternity — who knows us through and through, and who knows us better than we know ourselves — purify our time and our efforts, simplify our lives and our intentions, so as to get us there, to eternity, more surely, more directly, and more peacefully.