

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

18.09.2022
By Janet Foggie

Introduction

We come to our text this week to reflect on the meaning of faithful service. Before we read the text together we pause to acknowledge the recent death of Queen Elizabeth II and if you would like further prayers and resources for that event, for Sunday coming, there's links in the further reading section below to the Church of Scotland, Corrymeela and Iona Community statements.

We share in those words from friends in our own walks of faith, and I am sure you may also find words within your own community of faith which are helpful at this time.

In this reading, Jesus doesn't use the example of a king, as he did in the story of the two armies we looked at on Sunday 4th September, but instead he tells a story about a land-owner who has a manager looking after his land.

As you read the text think about what faithful service means to you, and what Jesus is truly trying to say to his disciples and followers as he tells them this tale.

Text

Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; 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 wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Comment

I used to know a couple who were so generous and kind-hearted they kept a small fund set aside in their family budget for the people who were going to ‘tap’ them for a bit of cash, the bills that were going to come in a bit ‘extra’ from local tradespeople, or the emergency payments wanted at short notice. I must say, when they told me this, I felt a little odd. It seemed strange to plan to lose money quite so openly. The longer I have thought about it, though, the more generous (rather than foolish) such a way of living might seem to be in the context of this story. Perhaps living in a way that is ready to give rather than take, and to accept that there are those in our world who might need our money more than we do, is a good way to live, and removes the sting from feeling cheated if or when these things do happen?

On the face of it this is a very odd story to tell about an unscrupulous manager getting away with bad accounting. But, in fact, that is not the story at all. This is about generosity, debt reduction and keeping one’s eye on the eternal things that matter and not the impermanent things of this world. Just as Jesus called his followers to ‘store up their riches in heaven’ in this story a spiritual contrast is drawn between worldly wealth and ‘true riches’. It turns on its head the idea of ‘good business’ which might be expected to wring every penny out of every debtor, and the true riches of love between neighbours, and a welcome ‘in the eternal home’. In the push for a high profit margin, the rich man and his manager lost the goodwill of their clients, but as the debts are reduced, and the debtors dealt with more leniently, so the goodwill of the debtors increases.

The link which drives this story forward is between business and reputation. To us, this might seem to have almost completely vanished in the modern world. The multinational corporations which span nations and continents appear on one level to have no need of the goodwill of their customers. However, as many environmental campaigners would attest, when goodwill is broken, even huge companies feel the pain.

I wonder what may seem to be true riches to us this week.

What is it that really matters?

And if we are squeezing a profit out of something, pushing a piece of work or colleague to their limits, who would be the beneficiary of a more lenient approach?

Jesus tells us in the story that leniency, generosity and forgiveness are attributes of the divine, and when we exercise these things ourselves, we are closer to heaven. In the ‘business’ of Christian discipleship, the generous, open handed, forgiving approach is the one which most closely reflects the nature of God.

The conflict in the story, is not just the true and false wealth, it is also the human

conflict of making generous and lenient choices – even when we would rather win, or profit, or gain by not so doing. We are called to give, not take, forgive not nurture grudges and to be kind rather than demanding. This is the point of Jesus' story to me. It is a 'lifestyle' choice, like my friends with their bank account for the people who might (or might not) cheat them in any given year. It is about giving freely and living as if heaven were right here on earth with us.

Response

This week is about thinking about giving.
Is there something you could give away?
Is there a debt you could cancel or a person you could help?

Is our response this week not in talking or thinking, but in action?

Prayer

God who gave life to all,
We thank you for the generosity of that gift.
We ask that we may be able
to give as kindly to others;
that we may store up our true riches
here in the beginnings of eternity
and may build faith and love
in lenient and forgiving hearts

Amen

Further Reading

To mark the death of HRH Queen Elizabeth II the following friends of Spirituality of Conflict have made their own statements and offered their condolences.

For the Corrymeela Community, their statement is here:

<https://www.corrymeela.org/news/224/tribute-to-queen-elizabeth-ii>

For the Iona Community their statement is here:

<https://iona.org.uk/death-of-queen-elizabeth-ii/>

For the Church of Scotland their statement is here:

<https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2022/articles/moderator-statement-on-the-death-of-hm-the-queen>

For worship resources specifically written for Sunday 18th September 2022 please follow this link:

<https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worship/prayers-and-worship-material-for-use-following-the-death-of-the-queen>