

Luke 16: 1- 13. Trinity 17. September 18th

Many years ago the pharmaceutical company for which I then worked organised a conference for cardiologists. The speaker at the final dinner was a young doctor who was beginning to make a name for himself on television. We anticipated a witty and entertaining half hour, however he began on an unexpectedly serious note, *I want to speak to you*, he said, *on a subject very close to your hearts*. This was followed by a pregnant pause during which his listeners leaned forward eager to know what was close to the heart of a heart specialist, *Money*, he said, and the place exploded with laughter. Yet I detected in the laughter of some of those distinguished doctors a self-consciousness and uneasiness which suggested that at least as far as some of them were concerned he was not too wide of the mark. But then money is close to all our hearts, we couldn't manage without it. Jesus had a lot to say about the use of money and he wove many parables around the topic, including the one we have just read, that of the Unjust Steward.

Before dealing with that, however, I want us to take a quick look at the opening sentence of our gospel reading. We read, *Jesus said to the disciples*; yet if you look up any other translation of this verse you will read, *Jesus also said to his disciples*. In their efforts to make this parable complete and self-contained the compilers of the lectionary omitted a small but important word, for that little word connects the Parable of the Unjust Steward with what has gone before, and what has gone before is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Furthermore, if we had continued reading to the end of the chapter we would have come to the Parable of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man with the starving beggar at his gate.

It is no accident that three parables all dealing with the same theme, the misuse of possessions, are in such close proximity, we should also bear in mind that the word *possessions* covers a much wider area than our money, our homes and the goods in them, it also concerns our natural gifts, the talents we were born with. Indeed *possessions* itself is a misleading term, for what we consider as things we own are in reality on temporary loan to us by God. At least that is how Jesus seems to have seen it. The Prodigal used his father's gifts recklessly; the Unjust Steward used his master's property carelessly and Dives, used his wealth selfishly.

The Prodigal behaved as if there was going to be no tomorrow, as though his inheritance was inexhaustible. He threw it away with both hands and reduced himself to such penury that he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat. There is something mad about recklessness, those who indulge in it are aware of the possible consequences yet take the risk nevertheless, or maybe it is the enjoyment of the risk that accounts for their recklessness. It's as though they have abandoned their senses. The phrase on which the parable revolves is *when he came to himself*. He had been behaving as someone who had lost himself and it was only when he came to his senses that he realised the depths of folly to which he had sunk.

The damage that reckless people may inflict can be horrendous: lives lost, homes and families destroyed, hearts broken. Every day the media testifies that we live in a world where recklessness abounds. Over all our future, or certainly that of our children and grandchildren, hangs the cloud of climate change, caused by our profligate use of the earth's resources. Like the Prodigal, but on an infinitely greater scale, we have dissipated our inheritance, and what is more, despite all the warnings, we continue to do so. The human race is a reckless species.

The reckless person foresees the possible consequence of his actions, the negligent person doesn't, it simply never enters his mind. Someone, for example, who is found guilty of reckless driving is one who either did foresee or should have foreseen the consequences; someone found guilty of driving without due care and attention has been careless, maybe a momentary distraction caused them to lose control. There is nothing in the parable of the Unjust Steward to suggest he deliberately wasted his master's goods, he simply did not attend to his duties with the care demanded.

Those who use their goods and their gifts carelessly don't throw them away with both hands,

they simply allow themselves to be distracted and to lose sight of what should be their main concern. The Parable of the Unjust Steward warns us that we should expend our money and whatever else has been entrusted to us with care. I once overheard an argument between two friends over how we should give to charity. One, an accountant, insisted that we should carefully calculate what we can afford and give in a disciplined, regular way; the other, a teacher, thought this was heartless, without feeling. He gave when he was moved to do so, perhaps by a beggar in the street or the photograph of a starving child. The Bible favours the accountant, the biblical pattern is to devote a specific percentage of our income to God and make proper provision to ensure that it is carried out. Charitable giving demands careful thought, but we also need to remember that care is needed in expending all the gifts we possess. Schumann in his book, *Advice for Young Musicians*, wrote: *From a pound of iron, which costs virtually nothing, a thousand watch springs can be made, which are worth a fortune. That pound, which you have received from the Lord – use it faithfully.*

The parable of Dives and Lazarus is the most ominous parable of the three. That of the Prodigal Son ends on the happy note of feasting; the Prodigal has returned home, been forgiven, the fatted calf has been killed and the angels are singing. There is joy on earth and in heaven. The end of the Parable of the Unjust Steward is more problematical, yet even so we are left with the impression that like the Prodigal the steward had come to his senses and behaved in such an astute way that he won both his master's and our Lord's commendation. There is no happy conclusion for Dives. Here is a man who used all his considerable fortune for one end only - himself. Thomas Merton writes somewhere that someone who worships himself worships nothing, and to worship nothing is hell - which is where Dives finished up.

In my last parish we had a yearly open-garden day which raised a lot of money to maintain the village church. Many parishioners were generous of their time and gifts and gardens, about 80 of them were involved in one way or another. Each year my job was to find a different selection of gardens. One afternoon I happened to pass one house where the husband and wife were working in the garden, they were parishioners I didn't know, which was unusual for I knew almost everyone in the parish, but I had never seen this couple at any village function or heard anyone refer to them, they led a very private life. I took the opportunity to ask them if they would consider opening their garden. Their polite response was, *No, we only do it for ourselves.*

Do not imagine I am saying we should never do anything for ourselves, of course we should, we are told to love our neighbours as ourselves and those who don't love themselves are unlikely to love anyone else. It is living only for ourselves that I question.

Dives comes in many guises, but whatever the guise the attitude is always the same, *I only do it for myself*. Whether it's just a garden you only do for yourself without relating it to the community in which you live, or a bank account squirreled away in some tax-free haven safe from the dirty hands of the poor, the end, says our Lord, is an ultimate regret that is like the burning pangs of Hell itself.

The reckless Prodigal was forgiven; the careless steward was rehabilitated; the much-admired, much-envied, highly successful Dives was, it seems, so lost in himself that he was also lost to God. What God has loaned to us deserves to be treated with care and generosity.