Amos 8: 4-7; 1 Timothy 2: 1-7; Luke 16: 1-15

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

This gospel passage this morning has to be one of the trickiest parables ever told. It is known variously, depending on the Bible translation you use as the parable of the dishonest steward or of the shrewd manager … So which is it then?

I spent some time discussing it earlier this week with colleagues from Deanery chapter, both lay and ordained, and there were about as many opinions as there were people in the room.

However, I have also had the benefit of hearing the Archbishop of Canterbury’s views on it, for what they are worth. ++Justin, with his background in senior management, said something along these lines: that the steward was discounting his prices in order to get cash in hand. He was doing nothing more good old-fashioned, though slightly sharp, business practice. He, like the rest of us, confessed to some difficulty with it. However, he encouraged all of us to get stuck in. He had a tutor when he was at vicar school, who said: There is no such thing as a difficult passage; there is only inadequate thinking. And then ++Justin said: I have always thought inadequately about this passage …. Deanery clergy are clearly in good company.

We have to start by recognising that Jesus is communicating; he is not running an academic seminar. All around him is this milling, noisy, sweaty crowd. What he wants to do is grab their attention and get them involved in the thinking. The archbishop said we have to remember that Jesus is also being a bit playful and humorous. It is a parable, which we have to think about, yes, but it is also recognising reality – which is that there are, in every time, crooks. Del Boy was not merely a twentieth century construct.

 And remember too that this is not meant to be viewed from a great distance and dissected as some complete theory of Jesus’ teaching about money. There are serious points in there, but he is telling a story about something more than that. So be willing to be drawn into it. It is part of our daily experience just as much as it was of the disciples’ daily experience. Do you recognise anyone in the story? Where would you place yourself in the story? Jesus is not, remember, advocating dishonesty; but he is saying something about our hospitality; our openness to people who may not be very good people.

The theologian Robert Farrar Capon said this: No one is ever kicked out at the end of those parables who wasn’t included **in** at the beginning. He had a theory that the unjust steward is actually the Christ figure in the story, who dies and rises. He is about to be booted out of his job but then is reinvented as the Robin Hood, who cuts a good deal for the people whose debts are relieved.

And other people – namely those peasants who were in such debt – also die and rise. Think of it as them being forgiven their debts. But through it all, this unjust steward/dishonest manager, whatever, is a bit of a dodgy character by the standards of the day. A bit like Jesus, who was forever breaking rules and hanging out with the wrong kind of people. Jesus was a bit of a shady character by those standards.

People want to sit nicely and worship with the good people. Look around you. How many bad people can you see? How many slightly dodgy people can you see? We are called not to be dishonest, but we are called to live on the edge – to be among the slightly dodgy types. Jesus takes part in the real world and has a profound engagement with it.

If we go back a bit and just look at the people whose debts were being reduced: the reality was that they lived in a permanent state of indebtedness. That is how the system was. Every revolution in that region in the first century wanted two things: to redistribute the land and to abolish the debts. People didn’t have bank accounts but they did have debts. They might sound from this story like heavy debts, but they were not unusual – that was sort of how the tenant farmer paid his rent – in kind as much as in cash. So the unjust steward goes through and writes off some of that debt. Those peasants are effectively having the most oppressive aspect of their life lifted – imagine having your rent cut in half. That was a cause for joy and a sort of liberation. See it as opportunist, not unjust. Acting like that would have made the steward a good friend to those people. If we think less about the impact on the landowner and more about the peasant, we can see that he would have been greatly relieved by that act.

There is a thread running through this about engaging with money and the value of money. If we think back to last week – to the sense of lost and found – the sheep and the coin and also the prodigal son - all those things that were lost were capital – they were possessions. And the joy experienced when the lost was found was great. The kingdom way of managing money is not to think too hard about the money but to see it in terms of people.

So this is a story of people: of an owner and a manager.  The owner discovers that his manager has been dishonest; fearing that he is going to be fired, the manager decides to do some dealing.  Facing certain unemployment, he decides to make some quick deals so that ‘people will welcome me in their houses.’  He goes to a few of the owner’s clients and settles their debt at much lower rates.  Collecting about half as much as they owe, the manager reckons that the clients will be grateful to him, and treat him well in the future.  The owner finds out about the tactics, and that is where it gets a bit strange.

The owner actually commends the man for acting ‘shrewdly’, or ‘cleverly’.  What?  The manager, who was already identified as dishonest, goes about being *more* dishonest, and yet the owner praises him?   Why would that happen?

What are we left with?  What is the good news?  I think it comes down to the same place that most of Jesus’ strange stories come to: relationships.  At the beginning of the story, there are any number of strained relationships.  There is a strained employer-employee relationship.  There are debts and debtors.  But what we are left with by the end are reconciled relationships and cancelled debt.

Back in chapter 11, Jesus taught the disciples to pray, saying: Give us each day our daily bread.  And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.  What if Jesus actually meant that?

But he wasn’t talking about money, you might argue.  He was talking about sin, and trespasses and stuff.

Yes, but maybe Jesus is trying to teach us something about the nature of relationships and money, and our relationships with money.  Perhaps the manager was praised because he put relationships ahead of money.  You could argue that his motivation was less than pure, but in the end, he valued his opportunity to ‘be invited into people’s homes’ over his ability to please his boss.

The Kingdom of God has precious little to do with fairness.  The Kingdom of God is about relationships.  It is about reconciliation.  It is about forgiving our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  It is not an easy story to hear.  It is sometimes an even harder story to live out.  It doesn’t make good economic sense.  Jesus had a funny way of not making sense.

It doesn’t make sense to plant a weed in a garden.  Or to ruin a whole vat of flour with some leaven.  It doesn’t make sense to turn the other cheek, or throw a party for people who can’t invite you to theirs, or leave behind a whole flock because one sheep went missing, or throw a party for your good-for-nothing son who finally came back home with his tail between his legs. And yet it does. **Amen**