

I think I can safely say that no parable of Jesus's baffles me as thoroughly as the parable of the "shrewd" or "dishonest" manager. I prefer not to consider how long I have wrestled with it over the years. I'm pleased this was not the Gospel for our baptismal family though displeased it's the week I am well and scheduled to preach.

People have struggled to make sense of this particular story from Luke's Gospel for centuries, not least because it raises the oddest and toughest of questions:

- Why does the rich man commend his manager for dishonesty?
- Why does Jesus offer his followers such an unsavoury character as a role model?
- In what sense are the "children of light" supposed to take a cue from the "shrewdness" of a self-interested scoundrel?
- Are we missing something, or does this story in fact contradict everything Jesus stands for in the rest of the Gospels?

I wish I had definitive answers to these questions, but I don't. What follows are possibilities. Limited and provisional notes. I'm not wholly satisfied with them, but maybe that's the ultimate point of Jesus's parables – to enter in and keep wrestling.

In the story he tells, Jesus describes a manager who is about to be fired for "squandering" his employer's property. Knowing that his time is short and his future prospects of employment limited, the manager summons his boss's debtors, reduces their debts, and thus secures their goodwill and loyalty. When his boss finds out what the manager has done, he doesn't get angry. He *commends* the manager for acting shrewdly to save his own skin.

Translation: Jesus describes a world we know only too well.

A world in which dishonesty, corruption, self-interest, and ill-gotten wealth rule the day.

A world in which selfish ambition often secures praise and prosperity, while honesty garners cynicism and contempt.

A world in which the heavy burden of debt cripples people both financially and morally.

A world in which unfairness, exploitation, and privilege are so systemic, we barely notice - much less protest.

A world in which ethical living is neither straightforward nor easy.

Maybe the parable of the shrewd manager is simply a grim but truthful portrait of the world as it is – the real world in which we are called to be "children of light."

Maybe the story is an acknowledgment that the calling is both radically countercultural and painfully hard.

Maybe the story is Jesus leaning in towards us and saying, "I know. It's bad out there. It's bad in here! I get it."

The truth is, we as Christians live in a world that is profoundly interconnected - and profoundly compromised. Even the tiniest financial decisions we make - where to shop, how to invest our money, what to eat or wear in an age of corporate greed, child labour, climate change, and globalisation - have far-reaching consequences.

Jesus's parable reminds us to hold this complicated reality close to our hearts and our consciences all the time.

And then ... when the manager realises that he's in trouble, he springs into action. He doesn't wait around, he doesn't despair, he has a plan. Perhaps it's this sense of urgency, of single-mindedness, of creative possibility and cleverness that wins the manager such high praise from his employer. The manager harbours no illusions; he knows himself well. He knows he's "not strong enough to dig," and he knows he's "too ashamed to beg," so he focuses instead on redeeming what he can about the situation he finds himself in. In other words, there's something no-nonsense, something steely and utterly practical about his choices.

Jesus puts it this way:

"The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

We can do a better job of engaging the crises, issues, injustices, losses, and failures facing our generation, facing our Church, facing the world, here and now.

Where and how might we be more shrewd, more clever, more creative, and more single-minded in our vocations as children of light?

Where in our individual and collective lives are we waiting around instead of hitting the streets, the pews, the hearts, the nations?

If the manager in Jesus's story can hustle so hard for his own survival, how much more might we contend on behalf of a world God loves?

We need to hustle for the survival of the church in our tradition. We need to be shrewd, to be creative, clever and singleminded in what we can do, and how we can be the body of Christ in God's vineyard.

I don't think it's possible to draw neat correlations in this parable.

The rich man is not straightforwardly God, and the manager is not straightforwardly us.

Perhaps the story offers us *glimpses* of the divine.

Where there is forgiveness, there is God.

Where there is unburdening, where there is liberation, where there is crazy, radical generosity - there is God.

And where God is ... is where we seek to be.

If nothing else, the parable of the dishonest manager is a reminder we need to tread lightly when it comes to the words and stories of Jesus. To approach with humility, to hold a place for mystery, and to refrain from closing down interpretations too soon.

As is ever the case with Jesus, we are dealing with an *overabundance* of meanings, truths, and possibilities - not a lack. The calling, still, is to live as children of light in a world that sorely needs solace, grace, forgiveness, and freedom.

I pray that we will enter into that calling with our whole hearts and minds - creatively, urgently, shrewdly - while we still can.

Wendy