

Who deals with your debts?

Amos 8:4-7, Luke 16:1-13

22 September 2019

Last Sunday Ian mentioned the current book our AFC Book Reading Group is reading together and I have just finished it myself. There are many interesting ideas in it about the Bible and about the ways to read it intelligently. One of the chapters has the catchy title: *Moving away from 'blah, blah, blah'*. (*Helen Paynter: God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today? BRF 2019*) The point here is that most of our interactions with each other sounds as so much 'blah, blah, blah' if we always simply state the obvious and what is expected.

My hairdresser asks me every week "What can I do for you today?" Then she describes the style she's been doing for me for the last - at least - 20 years. And I say without thinking, "yes, yes, that'll be fine". Just occasionally, I am sorely tempted to say, "well, today I would like you to make my hair really short and spikey and I would like you to dye it purple". Just to break the monotony of the weekly ritual and jolt ourselves out of the meaningless exchange of words. The author of our book calls this kind of interaction 'blah, blah, blah', something we say to each other, which we hardly hear any more and certainly don't pay any serious attention to. This is not what we call communication - she continues - because real communication only takes place at the point of departure from what is expected.

If she is right, Jesus was a true master of communication. People were continuously surprised by what he was saying. His teachings, his stories, his parables always had an unexpected twist in them, they ended on a note, that made his audiences sit up and left his commentators guessing and debating for centuries to come. And today's parable we've just heard read to us by Jo, is no exception. In fact, it is one of the most difficult and most highly debated of all of Jesus' parables. All you have to do is compare the different titles given to it in different Bible translations, to see how the process of interpretation has thrown up diverging approaches to the meaning of the parable. *The Dishonest steward* (NEB), *The Shrewd manager* (Good News Bible), *The Parable of the unjust steward, or the Parable of the Penitent steward* (WIKIPEDIA.) *The Crafty Steward* (Jerusalem Bible) and so on.

The parable is about a manager or steward who finds himself accused of dishonesty and is on the verge of being dismissed from

his job. He devises a plan to get out of his predicament by writing off the debts of some of his masters' debtors hoping to gain their friendship and good will. The story then concludes in an unexpected way, the master approves of the astuteness of the manager, and Jesus seems to agree with him. It is a troubling even outrageous story, which raises more questions than answers.

How are we to take it? Is it an ethical teaching as some of Jesus' other parables are, that end with 'go and do likewise'? If so, which of the characters is the one to be followed? We normally identify the master with God in these stories, yet here we don't really find any of characters worthy of following. But then perhaps we should take on board the fact that quite a lot of the figures Jesus uses in his parables are not necessarily nice characters, yet overall they always carry a positive message. We can think of the unjust Judge, who finally gives justice to the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), or the merchant, who sneakily buys up someone else's field in order to get a great treasure (Matt 13:44). Clearly, Jesus wants to get across one particular point but otherwise he is quite happy to use any story and any kind of character to bring his message home.

Or is this parable a realistic, even critical description of how things were in Jesus' time when landlords didn't know what was going on with their employees or even with their middle-management, or simply didn't care, so long as they received their profit? These were times when the managers, by definition, were taken to be dishonest, and when everyone's lives were so uncertain that they needed all their wits about them just to survive.

And what about us? Is this parable a time-specific story that only made sense in 1st century Palestine, or does it have some universal teaching/meaning for us, good, church-going folk in the here and now with our everyday lives and problems? Does it shed some helpful light on how best to deal with our resources, may they be material, or spiritual ones?

Perhaps we could start by acknowledging that even as good, church-going folk, we are not immune either to any of the failings of these characters Jesus is talking about. In the short reading we had from the prophet Amos the people who are castigated for unjust dealings are all upright Israelites, who scrupulously obey God's Law regarding Sabbath observances and other religious rules. Yet, within the literal understanding of those rules they manage to find room for oppressing the poor, using dishonest practices and short measures.

So, maybe, we should not just brush this story aside with the thought that it is not about us or for us.

The parable talks of a crisis situation, which is creatively and fundamentally transformed by an unrespectable, rogue of a figure. Well, we all know about crisis situations, since, - to a greater or lesser degree - our lives are littered with them. I have just visited a friend of mine and we were supposed to have a quiet, relaxing, catching-up time together. On the second day of my stay, my friend had a 'phone call telling her that her sister had been taken to hospital where she was diagnosed with an in-operable, final stage cancer. A crisis situation nobody had expected. A young person puts all his efforts in going to university, but just misses the mark and suddenly he doesn't know what to do next. A crisis situation. A father of four gets redundant, the income dries up. A crisis situation. We have hurt somebody with our words or actions and now the person won't talk to us. A crisis situation. A nation goes about its business and unexpectedly finds itself plunged into great political uncertainty. A crisis situation, what is the way out? Does the parable telling us through the manager's discovery that even in the greatest crisis relationships are to be treasured for they are far more important than any material possessions? It is certainly a truth we half know, but need reminding of. All the crisis situations we've just mentioned would be made more bearable if those involved were surrounded by understanding, loving families and friends, where true communication could take place.

But there is one more aspect of this story, which might lead us to an almost scandalous conclusion. When Jesus talks of debts, or debts cancelled, he often means 'sins' and 'sins forgiven' and on this understanding the parable may also have something to say to all of us. If we ask the question who in this story, audaciously cancels the debts owed to his master, we have to answer, the manager, 'the unrespectable, rogue of a person'. And then if we ask who is the One in the NT who audaciously forgives sins and counted as a rogue by the respectable establishment; who is killed as a criminal, yet is extolled by his Master and given new life; who through a shameful, disgraceful death becomes the Lord of our lives - well, we cannot but say, it is Jesus. Could it mean then that the manager is the Christ-figure in the parable? It is a startling thought, but as we said before, it does not mean that the two figures are identical in all their particulars.

Bill Loader, the Australian theologian calls it the 'rogue of grace', then he explains that grace is seldom respectable and that though it comes from God but it comes to us through human agency, which doesn't always have universal approval and it is certainly not based on an accountant's equation.

So we started with a story about money, and possessions and resources and their management. In both our readings we have seen the shared concern for the poor and those on the margins of society by both God and Jesus. The story of the shrewd manager highlights the fact that in one sense, all we have belongs to God and that not all of it is purely for our own personal use. We are to manage it in a way that meets with our Master's satisfaction.

And then we have seen how material possessions intertwine with human relationships as much in the parable, as they are in our own lives. And finally we were led into the question of debts and cancelled debts, or to use the religious language, sins and the forgiveness of sins. The shrewd manager cancelled the debts with an ulterior motive in mind but Jesus didn't, and we don't have to either. We have been granted forgiveness and new life freely, that's the nature of grace: it is gratuitous. And we can give it away in the same way, 'pro bono'. May God's Spirit help us to do so. Amen

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