

## **ST CHAD'S, LADYBARN THE 17<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY - 2013**

### **Today's Readings**

#### **First Reading** Amos 8:4-7

A strong judgement will fall on those who fail to let the poor live because they are more concerned with their personal enjoyment of wealth.

#### **Second Reading** 1 Timothy 2:1-7

On the basis of Jesus' self-offered life and ministry, we must pray for everyone.

#### **Gospel** Luke 16:1-13

On closer reading, the actions of the wrongly named "dishonest" manager have much to teach about godly use of money.

### **JESUS' TEACHING ABOUT MONEY**

*"Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth."*  
(Luke 16:9)

### **INTRODUCTION**

It's so good to be here at St Chad's to worship with you this morning.

St Chad reminds me of my childhood days.

I was born and raised in Bilston in the West Midlands, or Staffordshire as it was known then.

Our parish church was also dedicated to St Chad, albeit it was then only a wooden hut, which had been there since the estate was built, just before the war.

I attended the Sunday School at St Chad's every Sunday without fail.

Although my parents didn't worship there they were keen for me to receive a good Christian teaching as a sure foundation on which to build the rest of my life.

It's peculiar how one remembers particular things, although they may appear insignificant or only small to others,

but, I can picture even now being given a stamp every Sunday with a picture of either one of the saints, or a biblical character printed on it in colour.

I would take this home and show my parents, then affix it in my Sunday school book.

We were situated in the Diocese of Lichfield with our cathedral also dedicated to SS Chad and Mary.

St Chad was made Bishop of Mercia in 669AD, in the kingdom bearing the same name, ruled by King Offa.

The first cathedral on the present site was built in 700AD by Bishop Hedda to house the bones of St Chad which had become a sacred shrine to many pilgrims when he died in 672.

Offa, resented his own bishops paying allegiance to the Archbishop of Canterbury in Kent, so he created his own archbishopric in Lichfield, who presided over all the bishops from the Humber to the Thames.

I believe that Manchester was included in this episcopal area.

All this began in 786AD, with the consent of Pope Adrian. 'St Chad's Gospels' of SS Matthew and Mark, known also as

the 'Lichfield Gospels' are also housed in the cathedral, the third building on the original site, incidentally the only medieval English Cathedral to have three spires.  
(pause)

*"Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth."*  
v9

It has been well said that there are three types of people when it comes to money:  
those whose goal is to make it;  
those whose goal is to squander it;  
and those whose goal is to use it.

Henry Ford said, *"The highest use of capital is not to make more money, but to make money do more for the betterment of life."*

More recently, Bill Gates said,  
"Is the rich world aware of how four billion of the six billion live?  
If we were aware, we would want to help out, we'd want to get involved."  
*The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* is currently the largest charitable foundation in the world.

Our Gospel reading is notoriously one of the most difficult parables to interpret, and has always provoked searching questions.

The root problem is the commendation of the manager, or Steward as the Revised Standard Version calls him, who is plainly dishonest.

Perhaps we learn more if we turn it on its head.

## IS THE MANAGER REALLY DISHONEST?

The standard reading says this manager is dishonest. Why then does the master commend him?

Some say he recognises traits he admires.  
But how does this sit with Jesus' conclusion in vv.10-12?

The parable exists to illustrate honesty in small things, yet it commends apparent dishonesty.  
What's going on?

The problem stems from our assumptions and loaded translations of the original Greek.

First, let's go to the heart of the story.  
The manager is not necessarily "dishonest".

Describing him literally as a "manager of unrighteousness", Jesus could mean that he was a man who got his hands dirty;  
he was the man who dealt with the 'readies'.

His master could afford to be aloof, detached, "righteous", because he hired people to do the "grubby" work of finance for him.

Again, in v.9 we have the similar phrase  
*"make friends by means of dishonest wealth"* –  
in other words,

*"get your hands dirty"*, or,  
as the *New International Version* has it, "use money".

For Jesus, practical decisions of life and death always led him to dirty his hands with so-called unrighteousness!

Then we assume the master is "in the right".  
Jesus never says this – he merely presents a scenario.

In fact, on every other single occasion in Luke's Gospel where someone is referred to as a "rich man" they are someone with a faulty, or sinful approach to money.

This man hears charges.

He makes no investigation.

He cannot bear to hear of his wealth being squandered.

He summarily sacks the manager. Is that a picture of godliness?

Furthermore, the manager, by his subsequent actions, proves himself very shrewd.

This certainly wouldn't have been a squanderer!

The master was not only ungodly, but also foolish!

The manager is typical of his class – trapped by dependency on his white-collar income.

He's too proud to beg, perhaps, because he thought he'd escaped that level of subsistence.

Yet he's never been strong enough to find casual manual labour,  
and has relied on his brain to give him positions where he actually commands gangs of labourers.

And now, he and his family will be destitute!  
The master surely knows this,

but, if so, why does he act as he does?  
Or maybe he was too far removed – to use Bill Gates' word, "*unaware*".

The manager finds a way – some commentators say "legal", others say "illegal" – to provide for his future.

*Was he being sinful?*

*Or was he using money as it should be used, to save lives?*

If so, it was in stark contrast to the master, whose horror of wealth loss caused him to endanger lives!

Now look again at vv.10-12.

Who was truly faithful?

Who truly did God's will?

Who used money in a godly way?

Wasn't it the manager, the one who would get his hands dirty,  
become "unclean",  
be the "fixer",  
who revealed true righteousness?

Suddenly, Jesus' description of him as "*the manager of unrighteousness*" appears heavily loaded with an irony typical of the saviour.

Did Jesus mean us to interpret his words to understand the manager was commended not for his dishonesty, but to taking resolute action in a crisis?

The coming of Jesus forced people to decision.

*When even dishonest worldly people know how and when to take decisive action, much more should those that follow him!*

There is another plausible interpretation suggested by the theologian Leon Morris.

In Jesus day Jews were forbidden to take interest from fellow-Jews when they lent them money (similar to the Muslim practice of today).

But those who wished to make money from loans, evaded this by reasoning that the law was concerned to prohibit the exploitation of the poor.

Not to forbid innocent transactions!

They reasoned that anyone who had even a little of a given Commodity, was not destitute and thus lending to him was not exploitation.

As almost everyone had a little oil and a little wheat, the way was open 'to drive a coach and horses' through the law.

Whatever was borrowed was given a value in oil, or wheat (say, eighty measures of wheat), the interest being added on (say, twenty measures),

and the bond, made out for the repayment of the total in terms of oil or wheat (in this case one hundred measures).

The transaction was usurious, or in other words it applied an unreasonably amount of interest (we know them today as loan sharks).

But the bond would give no indication of this!

Commonly, such transactions were carried out by stewards

or managers, ostensibly without their master's knowledge.

You can see where this is going, can't you?

The parable presents us with a manager who, faced with the loss of his employment, protected his future by calling in the bonds, and getting the debtors to rewrite them so they no longer carried interest!

He looked to their gratitude to express itself by their taking him into their homes.

His action put his master in a difficult position.

He couldn't prove the manager had cheated him, now the bonds had been destroyed.

In any case he could not repudiate the manager's action, without convicting himself as being a party to the sharp practice of taking absurdly high interest payments!

So he put the best face possible on the situation and 'commended' the manager, thus making himself look good!

So, the manager is seen as conforming to the law of God and the master as applauding this. Both were acting decisively in a difficult situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Jesus concludes, *"You cannot serve God and wealth."*

In fact, this message is emphasised in Luke's Gospel more than in any other.

We cannot serve God and wealth.

If our goal is either to make it, or to squander it, we end up serving it.  
Under God's direction, we need to *use* it!

Neither hoarding, nor squandering it,  
make friends with it,  
be happy with it, give it away,  
lend without worry of return,  
help people, save lives,  
make money work for the good of humanity.

*That* is being faithful to God in the "little things" of this world.  
That is what God calls us to.

The truly unrighteous person in the story is the master;

the manager gets his hands dirty with money,  
and uses it to save lives,  
(albeit his own and those of his family).

The purpose of money is to save lives,  
not to take them  
and this principle holds whether you have a small amount to  
share, or billions.

**AMEN**