

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 22nd September 2019

Luke 16: 1 – 14; 1 Tim 2: 1 – 7; Amos 8: 4 - 7

There is a film called *Black Mass* that stars Benedict Cumberbatch and Johnny Depp. *Black Mass* is a biographical crime drama that tells the story of an infamous American mobster, James 'Whitey' Bulger, who was probably a psychopath, and definitely the head of the Winter Hill Gang.

There is one very clever scene in the film where Bulger is eating dinner in the home of one of the members of his gang. At the end of the meal Bulger compliments his host on the quality of the steak they have just eaten, and says to the other gang member, 'What did you marinate this steak in, because it is out of this world?'

The gang member, somewhat flattered that his boss is complimenting him, answers, "Ah! I can't tell you; it's a family secret." But, Bulger is persistent, "Come on," he says, "you've got to tell me. Come on you can do it!" The gang member is still flattered, but reluctant. So, Bulger, smiling, looks him straight in the eye and asks, with a hint of psychopathic menace, "What's the secret family recipe?"

More because he is excited about being in his boss' good books than frightened by his boss' questioning, the gang member blurts out the secret recipe in a rush of self-satisfaction.

But, then there's a pause in the conversation, and with a straight face, Bulger says, "I thought it was a family secret?" And, there's a chill in the air, and a vibration of menace in the conversation. The gang member protests, it's only a recipe he pleads. But, Bulger says, "No. You told me that it was a family secret. You spill the secret family recipe to me today, maybe you spill about me to the cops tomorrow. Is that something, maybe, that's a possibility?"

You spill the secret family recipe to me today, maybe you spill about me tomorrow. Or, as Jesus said, "The man who can be trusted in little things can be trusted also in great; and the man who is dishonest in little things is dishonest also in great things."¹

The parable of the dishonest steward is not one of the easiest parables to understand or to draw a lesson from. Two weeks ago, I was in Oxford for a conference called a Festival of Preaching at which there were two lectures about the parables that touched on a number of them and their suitability for preaching, but neither lecture was brave enough to address this parable.

Some parables just leave you asking, 'What was that about?!' Lest you fear that the problem with understanding the parable lies with you and your ignorance, you can take comfort if, as with this parable, the length of the explanation that Jesus has to give after telling his parable exceeds the length of the parable itself.

If Jesus has spell it out, it is not just you who is confused, but everyone. I think in this case the parable suffers from its presumption that those who hear it understand the complex social interactions of 1st century Palestinian economics. The characters in the parable: a rich man; a steward; a group of debtors; and a group of Pharisees, all have a relationship to each other that revolves around money or wealth, or as some versions of the Bible translate the words, 'worldly wealth', Mammon.

¹ Luke 16: 10

Mammon is money, wealth, and stuff; all the stuff that we buy and consume that is of this world. There is a sermon for each of these characters in this parable and their relationship to mammon, wealth, money, stuff. But, at the heart of the parable is the character of the steward, who is, in our terminology, the middle-man.

One lesson of the parable might be that we are all middle-men in this broken, complex, social world of ours. We are all people who have to navigate our way through complex relationships, and moral and ethical decisions in which we are pulled in at least two ways. The parable encourages us to understand that trying to ride two horses at once is not just very difficult, as we learn in life, but is often morally compromising.

The lesson is that when we are trying to ride two horses, we should choose one, because, after all, 'No servant can be a slave of two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and think nothing of the second. You cannot serve God and Money,'² Mammon.

In the story of James 'Whitey' Bulger that I began with, the implication was that the secret recipe is a small thing. And, if you cannot be trusted to keep a small secret like that, then you can't be trusted to keep a big secret – and not betray your fellow gang members. That, too is the implication in Jesus' parable. Money, wealth, mammon, Jesus implies, is a small thing. If you can't be trusted with that small thing – money -, then no one will trust you when it comes to the big things in life – relationships.

For many people, money is not a small thing. For many people money is very big thing because they don't have very much of it. The less you have of it, the more prominent a role earning it and spending it plays in your life. But, this parable isn't directed at those people who don't have much money. This parable is directed at people who have sufficient wealth and more, but for whom, despite that – despite the fact that they have a lot of it – nevertheless their mammon still plays a big part in their lives; is still one of their masters. In the parable, the Pharisees are such people, they are "lovers of money"³.

If money represents the small thing over which our actions are judged, what is the big thing? The big thing is our relationships. In the parable, the steward sacrifices money in order to build better relationships. If one master in our lives is mammon, the other master is our relationship to God, to ourselves, to other people. If the Pharisees are lovers of the master money, God and their neighbours are the masters that the Pharisees should be serving, 'Love the Lord your God, and your neighbour as you love yourself.'

In our world, when we have money, mammon, possessions, wealth, we too are torn between the demands of the master who is greedy, selfish and dishonest, and the master who would sacrifice worldly things, mammon, money for relationships built on the foundations of love, loyalty, generosity and self-sacrifice.

Jesus is saying, that if you want to know – as God wants to know – whether someone loves their neighbour or loves money you don't have to wait until there is a crisis, or a big demand on them, or something significant happens in their life; you just have to look at the way they behave in the small things in life.

In our world today with its 24 hour, and very public media, a good example of that is the way we judge politicians. The people whom in the letter we read from this morning, First Timothy,

² Luke 16: 13

³ Luke 16: 14

Paul encourages us to pray for, so that as he says, they, 'may lead a tranquil and quiet life in full observance of religion and high standards of morality.'⁴

There is often a debate when a politician gets caught out, about whether their misdemeanour tells us much about their character and suitability for public office. If a politician overclaims slightly on their expenses, evades a speeding ticket, cheats on their spouse, has no interest in the upbringing of their children, travels first class, does that tell us much about how they will behave and the decisions they will make when they have to take big, important decisions once they hold ministerial office?

Does, for example, the current Prime Minister's very public argument with his girlfriend in the weeks prior to his election as leader of the Conservative Party, tell us anything about his suitability for public office?

Both Jesus and Paul, would say that it does. Jesus, in the parable, argues that how people behave in something that is relatively small says something about how people will behave when they are engaged in relatively more important matters. As quite a few of the Prime Minister's colleagues have found; he doesn't treat well those who oppose him.

But, Paul's words are also worth noting. He too knows that the morality of those who hold public office is scrutinised carefully. That kind of pressure is difficult to live with; one small slip here or there, and people are liable to draw big conclusions about who you are, and how you behave. So, it is no wonder that Paul encourages us all to pray for those who hold public office. They need our prayers, so that they may lead a 'tranquil and quiet life,' and so better present themselves to the public at large. There is shrewdness to Paul's advice to us to pray for politicians and leaders, as there was a shrewdness to the actions of the steward in the parable.

We are judged not so much on how we behave in moments of crisis; nor are we judged so much when we reach the pearly gates; nor are we judged so much on the significant decisions we have made in our lives, we are much more likely to be judged on the small things: how we spend our money, what we do with it, whether we give it away or hoard it, whether we are generous or greedy.

We are judged not so much on the big thing like whether we are loyal to our country in a time of war or crisis – a rare event, but whether we are loyal to our grandmother and that secret family recipe. We are judged not so much on the impossibly complex and big decision of something like immigration policy when we become Britain's Home Secretary, but how polite we are to those visiting or seeking refuge in our country, and how we welcome strangers into our churches or our homes.

We are judged not so much on whether or not we know which fork and knife to use when we dine with the Queen, but on whether we politely share the meal on our tables, or greedily fill our plates.

This morning Jesus, the Son of God; James 'Whitey' Bulger, a psychopath; and Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, have illustrated this point, that, 'The man who can be trusted in little things can be trusted also in great; and the man who is dishonest in little things is dishonest also in great things.'

⁴ 1 Timothy 2: 2

But, I think more than anything else, the best illustration of Jesus' point in this opaque parable comes from a news story I read this week about a plumber. The plumber hit the headlines because someone shared a photo of a bill he sent to a customer. The customer was 91 years old and in poor health, and her boiler was broken. The bill, for a substantial amount of repair work, came to zero pounds.

It turns out that this isn't the first time that the plumber hasn't charged people who are ill, frail, or elderly for work that he has done. In fact, he has made a business out of it. Only now have people noticed. When interviewed the plumber talked of the debts he had incurred for his acts of kindness, a theme that recurs in the parable we read, but also of his desire to prioritise the morality of his business over its profitability.

It is no surprise that this plumber has made many friends – much like the steward did when he started writing down people's debts. But, like the steward the plumber's decisions to prioritise values over profit has been a shrewd one. He now funds his business not just through the work he does, but also as a charity to which people can donate so that he can carry on doing some work for free. Now, his generosity and kindness has brought him friends, a living, and a deep sense of self-worth.

If God is our moral guide; if self-worth is what we mean by loving ourselves; if our concern for the poorest, frailest and oldest in our society is what we mean by loving our neighbour, then don't be a lover of money, instead, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'