

Homily for Trinity XIV – 2022

All of our Lord's parables are challenging, but the Parable of the Unjust Steward is surely one of the most problematic. The parable is bracketed by two other money parables, the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother and the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In each of these parables, money is also a problem, as it certainly is in this one too.

The parable begins with a rich man calling his steward before him to inform him that he will be relieving him of his duties for mismanaging his master's resources. A steward is a person who manages the resources of another. The steward had authority over all of the master's resources and could transact business in his name. This requires the utmost level of trust in the steward. The steward is being released for apparent mismanagement, not fraud. This explains why he is able to conduct a few more transactions before he is dismissed and why he is not immediately tossed out on the street.

Really the parable is a story about a set of rascals. The steward would appear to have followed a career of embezzlement. Realising that he will soon be without a job, the steward makes some shrewd deals behind his master's back by reducing the debt owed by several of the master's debtors in exchange for shelter when he is eventually dismissed. The debtors were rascals also. What they owed in both instances mentioned were very significant amounts. The amount of olive oil being reduced from a debt of about 4,000 litres to about 2,000 litres. The amount of grain owed was enormous, almost 20 tonnes. It was reduced to approximately 16 tonnes. The debtors were very happy indeed for the account books to be falsified in their favour, significantly so. The master himself must also have been something of a rascal too, for instead of being shocked by this clever ruse of his dishonest steward he actually praised him for this shrewdness.

Our Lord draws four lessons from this story of deceit and cunning.

First lesson is that the sons of this world are wiser than the sons of light. This should be understood as meaning if only Christians were as eager and ingenious as the man of the world is in his attempt to attain money and comfort, they (we, I

should say) would be much better Christians. If only we would give as much attention to the things which concern our souls and our eternal well-being we would all be much better people. Over and over again, most of us will spend twenty times as much on our pleasures, hobbies, sport, holidays, clothes etc as we will on our church. Our Christian faith will begin to take on a genuine reality and effectiveness when we spend as much time and effort on it as we do on our worldly activities.

Second lesson is that material possessions should be used to cement the friendships where the real and permanent value of life lies. St Ambrose says in this regard... *“the bosoms of the poor, the houses of widows, the mouths of children are the barns which last for ever.”* We can use our wealth selfishly or we can use it to assist others and in that regard let me remind you again of St Paul’s words... *“while we have time let us do good unto all, especially those who are of the household of the faith.”* (Galatians 6:10) Possessions are not of themselves a sin, but they are a great responsibility. Christians who use their possessions to help others in the church have gone far to discharge that responsibility.

The Third lesson our Lord draws is that the way we fulfil small tasks is the best proof of our fitness or unfitness for greater tasks and responsibilities. This is universally applied in all earthly things. Jesus also applies it to the things of eternity and observes that in reality we are only stewards ourselves over all that we think we have. All that we have is only ‘on loan’ as it were. We will not be taking any of it with us to the life of eternity. On the other hand, in eternal life we will receive what is our eternal due and just what that is to be will be determined by how we used the things over which we are only stewards in this life.

The Fourth lesson that our Lord gives is perhaps the phrase from this gospel that we would probably know best.. *“You cannot serve both God and mammon.”* (which means money or, more generally, material things.) If God is our Master, then our wealth will be at His disposal. In other words, the faithful and just steward whose Master is God will employ that wealth in building up the kingdom of God. Serving God can never be a part time or a spare time job. Once a Christian chooses to serve

God faithfully, every moment of our time and every atom of our energy belongs to God.

The dishonest manager is about to be dismissed from his job, but he is wise enough to use his last-minute opportunity to prepare for the future. The lesson of the parable is not that we should be dishonest, but that we should use every means at our disposal to prepare for our eternal home.

The principle that Jesus conveys in the four conclusions He draws is one of a just steward rather than an unjust one. The unjust steward saw his master's resources as a means for his own personal enjoyment and advancement. Conversely, Jesus wants us, His followers to be just, righteous and generous stewards. If we understand the principle that everything we own is a gift from God, then we realise that God is the owner of everything and that we are His stewards. As such, we are to use the Master's resources to further the Master's goals. Specifically, we are to be generous with our wealth and use it for the benefit of others.