

Luke 16:1-13

22.09.19 (Downing Place URC, Cambridge)

### *Salvation as Subversion*

Yes, indeed, how good to be back in this pulpit and how good to see many dear friends once again! But thanks a bunch for the text. The dishonest steward. An endorsement of shady financial practices. A celebration of playing fast and loose with other people's money. Thanks, John.

Yes, it's a strange story and a hard one to interpret. Here is this steward who apparently has been squandering his master's property. And part of the problem is that we are told very little about this master who the servant effectively defrauds. Was his loot all ill-gotten gain? The story is usually called the parable of the dishonest steward but might it actually be the parable of the dishonest rich man? Given the context, in all likelihood this manager was at the very least a representative of a class of people who were a curse of Jewish society under Roman rule: absentee landlords who were happy to have someone else run their businesses and steward their properties while they lived far away in luxury, creaming off the profits. But does that make any difference? Does it give the steward carte blanche to steal and to squander his master's tainted wealth? And now, it's payback time. The steward is called to account and his wrong-doing exposed, and what is he to do? Well, he runs around to his master's debtors cutting what they owe, writing off debts, slashing their bills. And the result? Well, the steward wins twice. Firstly, he makes a lot of friends who owe him a lot of favours that will stand him in good stead; but then he is also commended, surprisingly, by his master who is impressed by his cunning and ingenuity.

So what are we to make of this story? Well, perhaps a starting place is to recognise that Jesus here is confronting what to him was a great enemy, a major stumbling block to the kingdom he was proclaiming. And I'm talking here about wealth – what Jesus elsewhere called mammon, a false god that could be relied upon to lead people astray. And Jesus had a great deal to say about mammon, far more than he had to say about sex and some of our other preoccupations. Earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus has spelt it out:

‘woe to you who are rich,  
for you have receive your consolation...’

And Jesus ends this story with those disconcerting words, ‘you cannot serve God and wealth.’ For Jesus, mammon, wealth, is part of what some contemporary biblical scholars call ‘the domination system’, a hierarchical structuring of society that creates inequality, safeguards the interest of the powerful and marginalises and disinherits the powerless. The domination system is bound up with empire, it was embodied in Roman rule in Jesus’ day, it was exemplified in absentee landlords, it was fuelled by mammon and it is still with us today. For Jesus, however, the domination system went deeper than Rome. It had a spiritual quality about it. It was associated with the figure known as the Satan, who Jesus described as the strong man whose house he has come to plunder.

Now, of course, one feature of the domination system is that it is not all bad. Those of you familiar with that scurrilous film ‘Life of Brian’ will be familiar with the ‘what have the Romans ever done for us?’ scene. ‘What have the Roman ever done for us...?’ Well, apart from the roads, the aqueducts, irrigation, public order... etc. So the thing about the domination system is that it is double-edged, ambiguous. My taxes that provide national health cover also fund weapons of mass destruction. We still have a welfare state, and yet inequalities are growing and we have all the grievances that are milked by populism. I need money to live but I can’t be sure that all my savings are ethically invested, and I end up colluding with mammon whether intentionally or not. And this part of the problem with the way this parable is often described: ‘the parable of the unjust steward’, as if it were cut and dried, back and white with an unjust steward defrauding a just system. But that is never the case.

A few chapters further on we come to the story of Zacchaeus, the little tax collector in his sycamore tree. He might double as the rich man in this parable. And the story of Zacchaeus ends with the wicked, cheating tax collector, who shamelessly boosts his own bank balance by adding to people’s tax burden, repenting and giving back all the money that he’s embezzled. Great. But the story shouldn’t end there. Even a repentant, reformed, just tax collector is still resourcing an empire which ruthlessly extracts wealth from poor peasants, and which panders to absentee landlords. When Sleazy Zac becomes

Honest Joe he is still payrolling an empire that is funding military adventures and keeping people in subjection. You see, you do not escape the grip of mammon, you do not redeem the domination system, when you go straight. And maybe that puts this servant's actions into perspective. He's defrauding the system, yes - but the system has been defrauding him for years. And he's defrauding the system in such a way that the victims of the system – those saddled with debts they cannot bear - are suddenly rejoicing. You may know of the Old Testament institution of the sabbath year and the Jubilee, when every seventh and every fiftieth year debts were cancelled – written off - and that was such good news to the poor (or it would have been if it was ever practiced and there is no evidence that it was: I wonder why!). And Jesus took Jubilee as the theme for his ministry in his sermon in Nazareth – why? Because it tied in so tightly with his campaign against mammon and the domination system. Jubilee and sabbath are the antidote to it, and here in his story Jesus has the servant enact his own one-man Jubilee! ‘How much do you owe? A hundred jugs of oil? Make it fifty!’”

In this light, what the servant is doing is subverting the system. And here he aligns with Jesus, the arch subverter, the one in whom the domination system met its match. And this is perhaps where we need increasingly to see our role as Christians: as those who find joyful, creative, subtle, liberating ways to subvert the downside of the system.

You see, there are two ways of thinking of religion. In one account religion is the glue that holds society together, and the church is the institution that enshrines all the values that society cherishes and treasures. So to be a Christian is to be a decent, law-abiding citizen. And in the USA godly zealots argue that the ten commandments should be displayed in public places to remind us how good, decent people live. And thus the church serves order and symbolises society at its best. One Old Testament scholar however argues that this is a complete mis-understanding of the purpose of the ten commandments. In fact they are counter-commands, commands – not least the sabbath command - that subvert and undermine Pharaoh and the culture of Egypt that the Israelites were sprung from: Egypt being the very epitome of the domination system. So the primary purpose of the commandments is not to

reinforce the system but to subvert it. And I have to say that this is where I, having returned to my Church of Scotland roots, miss the non-conforming, dissenting ethos of the URC.

Let me tell you a little about my church in Amsterdam. Given over to the English-speaking Protestant community in 1607, this was a community largely made up of merchants, members of militias, and, of course, refugees and migrants. And for years the church has seen itself as having a proud place in Amsterdam, with an important role in the life of the city, and close links with what we might call the domination system. So when William of Orange and his wife Mary left to become King and queen of Great Britain in 1689 they gave the church a brass lectern from which I still preach every week. Now, next year will be the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower and our church has a somewhat disputed relationship with the pilgrim fathers. They settled in Amsterdam before moving to Leiden and thence to Plymouth and on to the New World, and we have a central stained glass window commemorating the Pilgrims, graciously donated by American friends and descendants who presume a link with our church. And next year we could capitalise on that. The trouble is that the link is highly dubious. The pilgrims who set out after a time in Amsterdam were known as Separatists, strong advocates of the separation of state and church and of a nonconformist, dissenting persuasion. So they would not have taken well to the fact that the minister of the Church in the Begijnhof, as it's known, was paid by the city fathers. And those same city fathers attended the church and sat in what was known as Burgomaster's pew facing the pulpit, a somewhat ominous symbol of scrutiny and control. Indeed a major motive for giving the church to the English speaking community in the first place was to divert godly English-speaking folk away from separatists, to keep them well away from the radicals. And I sometimes look at the Burgomaster pew which still stands there and the stained glass window of the Pilgrims, and I see the very tension I am trying to unpack – between religion that upholds order and the establishment and the domination system, and a faith that subverts and lives in tension.

All of which brings us today. This afternoon we close a beloved church at Cherry Hinton Road that has born witness to the Gospel for close on a hundred years. Another church goes, another

symptom of the decline of religion in this part of the world. People no longer look to the church as the symbol of social aspiration and how we are to live. But the death throes of religion can be the wellspring of joyful, subversive faith that learns to undermine the false gods that rule our world. We need to develop a subversive ingenuity that is a match for the sophisticated deception that props up the domination system.

And in the case of mammon, the subject of our story today, we return to Zacchaeus and learn from him. Zacchaeus' subversion of mammon came not when he decided to stop cheating and become a good tax-collector, but when he resolved to pay back every one he had defrauded four-fold: an excessive and exaggerated act, going far beyond what God's Law stipulated. That's one way to undo mammon. Where mammon promotes scarcity and convinces us all that resources must be fought over and grabbed and hoarded and competed for, God's kingdom promotes wild excesses of generosity and open-handedness. And that's how you shake off the grip of mammon. And such generosity is reflected in the so-called dishonest steward's carefree abandonment of people's debts – this Jubilee gesture - even if it was someone else's money. May God grant us such joyful, irresponsible, subversive ingenuity. Amen

O holy and gracious God,  
Maker and giver of life;  
Saviour and giver of salvation;  
Spirit who comes closer than breath,  
We praise and bless your holy name.  
You are the generous God,  
the liberating God who longs that  
your world may flourish,  
and that your good gifts should be shared,  
and that all may rejoice in your bounty.  
You are the God who will not stand by  
when the world is skewed by injustice  
and when wealth is accumulated and hoarded  
and where people are crushed by poverty  
and denied access to your riches.  
And you have come in Christ to reconfigure  
the world that has become disfigured  
and to set it to rights.  
You have come in Christ to release us  
from captivity and confinement  
and to lead us into a broad place where  
we are find freedom.  
We confess our collusion with a  
disordered world;  
we confess our contribution to a world  
that is groaning in its pain.  
And so we join together in confessing our sins...

R & S 4a...

Raise us up by your Spirit to lead new lives  
Of faithfulness, grace and generosity.  
And we pray in the words that Jesus taught us,  
saying together...