



Sermon preached by Revd Alex Clare-Young on 18th September 2022
Readings: Luke 16: 1-13; Amos 8: 4-7

Our Gospel reading today is one of the trickiest parables – one that shocks us with its dramatic image of a financial and property manager, who is seemingly paid on commission, stealing from the wealthy man that he serves. If we are to understand the message of social justice at the heart of Jesus’s teaching here, though, we need to cool the temperature a bit.

The Bible is full of hyperbole – of over the top illustrations. In Jesus’s teaching, and the depictions of conversations that he has, exaggeration is often used to make a point. For example, in the story of Jesus meeting a woman at a well, the woman says that Jesus has told her ‘all that she has ever done’ when, in reality, he has simply described some of her relationships.

These exaggerations shouldn’t worry us or detract from Jesus’s teaching. Hyperbole is a common element of both rabbinical teachings and Greco-Roman rhetoric. In other words – teaching in this way made complete sense in Jesus’s cultural context – in the social world in which he was telling stories that matter. And we still use hyperbole, exaggeration, and rhetoric more widely in marketing, mission and evangelism today.

But, going back to the reading, what happens if we cool down the rhetoric? Remove some of the exaggeration? Let’s take away the dramatic image of a theft, the supposed crime. After all, isn’t this a story of paying it forward? The manager ensuring a better deal for the workers, as well as for himself? And didn’t the wealthy man lose a tiny proportion of his high income, in comparison to the massive difference that a slightly lower debt would have had on the lives of those who worked to earn his wealth?

Take away the taboo, shame and judgment associated with theft, and we have a story about an organisation of workers finding a way, together, to give back to each other, to use what they had together, in solidarity, for good.

I once experienced a good manager paying it forward, when I was in a pretty bad place. I was in a coffee shop, in quiet tears, because I had had a serious argument with someone that I had loved. I had been there for quite some time, because I had nowhere else to go, and thankfully they did free refills for students. The manager quietly approached me, and put a cookie on my table, saying that I looked like I needed a treat. That small action, which technically amounted to a local manager stealing from Costa Coffee, albeit in a tiny way, made my day a little bit more doable.

Nowadays, many coffee shops enable customers to buy an extra coffee, which is then reserved for the next person who comes in unable to pay. In this way, many cafes are providing hot drinks, and even food in some cases, for people who have little.

These little actions change things. The manager changed his employer’s mind. If his so called theft really was a terrible crime, would the manager have rewarded him for it? Instead of punishing him, the employer commended his actions. Jesus used this example to tell his listeners that “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much”. The manager showed that he was trustworthy by using a little of his employer’s money to help others.

It doesn’t matter if the manager’s motive was to make a little extra money himself, and to get his employer their cash more quickly. The effect made all of the difference. Now that the

employer's mind has been opened, perhaps he will consider charging his workers more fairly, improving the system so that everyone benefits, not only the few. Whatever the intention of a good deed, or a disruption of an unjust system, there is often a cascade effect of good will, and positive action.

The parable of the good manager shows us the need to organise and act for social justice in order that those who have the power to change things, like the rich man in the story, can see another, better, way forward.

This is far from the only time that the Bible approaches this topic. The theme of jubilee, ever more relevant as we creep closer to the URC's fiftieth anniversary, is all about forgiving debts, just like the manager and, in turn, his employer did. When we talk about forgiveness, in a contemporary Western culture, we often think of it like a Clinton's or Hallmark card – like a soft-hearted emotion towards a person who has harmed us. And that is ok.

But, in scripture and in the roots of the word – forgiveness means to let go of all claims on a person. To let go of all claims on a person. In other words, it is an action that frees the debtor, rather than a feeling of benevolence towards them. And this forgiveness – this active forgiveness of debts, rooted in justice, also does include space for grief and for anger. We hear this anger, this lamenting, in Amos's words. Our reading from Amos this morning can be paraphrased as saying:

Hear this, you who oppress and marginalise:

This season of injustice will end.

You won't be able to denigrate good people with lies any more.

God will not forget justice.

Those with power are called to free those with little agency, little power, little justice. That is forgiveness. That is God's justice as portrayed in scripture.

People have been talking to me about social justice everywhere that I go in Cambridge City Centre – from employers to managers, from councillors to shop owners, from bar staff to patrons, from door staff to folks wandering the streets. Reflecting on those conversations, and on scriptures, I shared some modern parables with the elders on Tuesday.

One of them was the parable of the questioning priest, the story of Dom Helder Camara, a Brazilian archbishop and liberation theologian, in his own words, is that:

“When I feed the hungry, they call me a saint. When I ask why people are hungry, they call me a Communist”. In other words, we are often very comfortable with good deeds, and less comfortable with challenging questions and words.

Another was the parable of the river. Telling this story, another Archbishop, Desmond Tutu explained that, “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in”. In other words, we need to not only help people, but also understand and talk about the systems that cause their distress and risk.

These parables are imperfect taken alone, but powerful taken together. They remind us that, whilst there is a place and time for rescuing folks – after all, a person overboard should never simply be left to drown – there is also a time and space for challenging the unjust systems that strand folks, leaving them in need of rescue. Otherwise, we will simply run out of hands and feet to do the work. These are the questions that exercise me, and that exercise most of the people whom I have met during my first six months in pioneer ministry in Cambridge.

And so, I am going to continue meeting with people, sharing stories like the story that the manager shared with his employer, like the stories of the people who Amos gave voice to, creating spaces to ask the difficult questions, and say the difficult things, working alongside and with those who are creating spaces of rescue and safety.

And so, I would like to introduce you to the pioneer project Solidarity Hub.

Over the next twelve months, I will be spending much of my time doing this:

- Co-operatively working towards the radical renewal of solidarity and hope. Organising across diversity for social justice and eco justice in the city of Cambridge.
- Networking across communities and individuals who care deeply about inclusion / affirmation, well-being, and sustainability.
- Dismantling binaries and stereotypes around tables and on city streets by holding space to share, to hear, to feel, together.
- Dancing into - and out of - spaces of leisure to co-curate gatherings of radical love and distinctive identity.
- Imagining a new world into being by living in the world we dream of actively today.

And if there is more you would like to know or explore about what some of that means, ask me over coffee, or have a look at my report to the Church Meeting next week, and my introductory article in Place Matters in October.

The work of the Solidarity Hub will include talks about inclusion, wellbeing, and sustainability, drop in days for 1-1 conversation and hands on activities, and action sessions in which people can work together for change, in ways that reflect the Gospel – the good news – that we hope to share. A parallel project called Solidarity Scripture will begin at Downing Place this October – an opportunity to explore the Bible and contemporary culture in a conversation over a meal with relevant questions and multisensory prompts. This year, Solidarity Scripture will be exploring power in the very diverse themes of death, gender, love, Lent, sex, mental health and pride. Watch this space for more information.

But let's go back and recap what we have learnt from the good manager, who shared the employer's wealth with the workers.

1. Parables – words, ideas and stories that exaggerate and challenge matter. They might be worrying at first, but the message underneath is worth working for. I'm not literally going to don a tutu, for example, when I say I will dance, I mean I'm going to celebrate with folks in bars and clubs!
2. Forgiveness – it's not just a feeling, it's a practice of freeing people from their debts – actual and metaphorical.
3. Change – it's possible, but only when ordinary people commit to small acts of kindness, small changes that can inspire bigger ones.
4. Finally, as gifts from our younger folks reminded us, 'Good vibes' – it feels good to make others feel good.

So let's do it! Amen.