

Sermon Proper 20 Year C 22/09/2019

Amos 8:4-7, Ps 113, 1 Tim 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13

There was a man in a church with his young son. The boy noticed a bronze plaque on the wall and asked his dad what it was for. His dad told him it was a memorial to commemorate those who had died in service. The boy asked, "Which one, the morning or the evening service?"

I hope today I don't bore you to death, but it is the beauty of stories like this, and today's strange gospel story, that they allow us a variety of interpretations.

If we put this strange parable with the passages from Amos, the Psalm and 1 Timothy, there are two clear themes for me, that emerge. The first is the obvious one – the subtle power of money to lead us into corrupt and exploitative practices.

Amos speaks out against the corrupt business practices of wealthy merchants, where the poor are being ripped off and treated badly; then Psalm 113 praises the God who uplifts the poor and needy, showing clearly that how we use our money is of great spiritual concern to God.

For those of us in this wealthy country, there is a tremendous responsibility to watch how we use our wealth, and there is great emphasis nowadays on ensuring that we don't buy anything that is exploiting others, using our buying power instead to ensure that fair trade practices are employed, fair wages are paid to those who produce what we use, and that the impact on our planet is sustainable.

Jesus seems to suggest in his gospel story that we should be shrewd and dishonest in using our resources to gain friends. This parable unsettles us because it is unpredictable and inappropriate to Christian ears. To gain friends by dishonest wealth – we have never heard the like! It forces us to think of how, in the practice of our faith we conform to social norms - but maybe for God, we should be thinking outside the box. I don't think anyone in the parable was complaining of the managers' treatment of them! When we use our opportunities and our wealth to uplift others, we bring honour and dignity both to them and to ourselves.

If we take this call of the Gospel seriously, we may well find ourselves using our money in ways that "the world" would consider inappropriate, and we

may find ourselves connecting with those who are considered to be undeserving. This may be a good week to do an 'audit' of your use of money – and the priorities it reveals – and to make some gracious, inappropriate, and dignity giving choices.

It is good to remember that whatever wealth we have or had in this church is attained through the generosity of our people, past and present, and that our wealth is not a sign of God's blessing for us alone, but is a resource to share and use to uplift the needy. Think of the Thomas Bromwich Trust and the Handsworth Charities and the good that they do today from such small beginnings!

As we build up our resources in St Mary's again, we need to ensure that we have not fallen into the temptation to accumulate money for its own sake, and that we are quick to use our money for grace – forgiving, helping and uplifting the needy in our Parish community.

The second theme is that of forgiveness and undeserved honour. Psalm 113 praises God's grace toward those who are most vulnerable, giving them undeserved honour; Paul reflects on God's grace in Christ, that is extended to all

people, and embodied in the prayers of God's people. Paul urges us to pray and give thanksgiving for everyone, from ourselves, and the poor, to our government, then to lead a quiet, good and peaceful life, mindful that Jesus has ransomed us, and that God wants everyone to come to the knowledge of salvation.

And Jesus tells this story of a master who, about to be dishonoured because of his dishonest manager, decides to fire him, but then has to reconsider when, through radical, inappropriate forgiveness, the manager wins honour for the master and a social and secure future for himself.

Put these two themes together and what emerges is the power of generous giving and gracious forgiveness from God our saviour, to lift us to places of honour and togetherness. A place where we share among each other, and sometimes give inappropriately and wildly – maybe to make ourselves feel better, or to make ourselves look better, but a giving that God approves of.

After all, the giving of his only son to save a bunch of sinners like us was a wildly inappropriate

scheme, unthinkable, but that, dear friends, is why we are here today.