

»*The Dishonest Manager*«

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So, he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Congregation,

This is another one of those texts that at first glance seems to be impossible to understand.

A few days ago, somebody asked me what texts I preach on when asked to take over a Service. Do I just see what has been happening in the world and then decide on something appropriate? It's actually not so random. The United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD) publishes suggestions for sermon texts, as well as the psalms, hymns of the week, watchword for the week, readings etc. and distributes these to Lutheran congregations as guidelines. These texts follow a

particular theme throughout the year and are appropriate to the time in the Church Year that the various Sundays fall into. At the moment, towards the end of the Church Year, we are encouraged to ponder on the relationship between Christ and ourselves in the light of the fact that our own end must come some time or other. We are encouraged to think about the way we have lived our lives, our relationships with other people, our beliefs and hopes.

In Jesus' time, people also had thoughts about these things and tried to find answers in religion and philosophy. Occasionally these existential questions were also put to Jesus himself and he tended to approach significant issues by telling a story, a parable. These stories were written down later by the evangelists and other writers of the books in the New Testament, sometimes as eye witnesses, sometimes in retrospect. And we, over 2000 years later, read these stories and try to apply them to our own lives and 21st century thinking.

So, what has all this to do with our text? We read about a manager who has squandered, wasted his master's wealth, and is asked to give an account of what he has done, prior to being fired. He then goes and tells the debtors to write off a large portion of what they owe, seemingly to get into their good books so that they will stand by him when he loses his job. And, believe it or not, his master actually praises him for doing this! Has the manager just been working for his own survival? We know that people in this world are extremely clever when it comes to survival. We see it every day. That is when the boundaries between right and wrong become absolutely fluid.

There have been numerous attempts by various theologians to interpret our sermon text, but most of these interpretations just don't seem to make sense! There is an interpretation that justifies the actions of the manager because he has to survive, he has to ensure that his life can go on, that he has some means of existence further down the line; that friends

are there to help in times of need. This appears to refer to verse 13 in our text where it says we cannot serve both God and Mammon / Money / Wealth. But it also appears to say: If we are to be dishonest with money, then at least we should do it for the benefit of others. This does not sound like what we expect to hear from the Gospel! It simply sounds as if the manager is crafty, cunning, shrewd. Not exactly an example to be followed!

Another interpretation alludes to the fact that in the Jewish tradition it was not permitted to charge interest, but that in fact prices were frequently increased to actually include what would have been considered to be interest. This would imply that the manager had only deleted the 'interest part' of the repayment, thus charging the actual amount owed. For this he could well be praised by his master. And that the debtors were actually asked to change the amount of their debts on their promissory notes themselves, was apparently in Jesus' time quite usual.

If, however, we consider this parable, as many others are, to be a metaphor, then we might come up with a few different ideas. - What is a metaphor? *A Metaphor is a figure of speech (a picture in words) that makes an implicit, an implied, or hidden comparison between two things that are really unrelated, but which share some common characteristics. In other words, we see the resemblance between two contradictory or different objects, based on one or more common characteristics.*

Now, what do we read in our text? It seems as if a reason is being sought to dismiss somebody from his job. The accusation against the manager is not based on embezzlement or fraud, but on squandering, on wastage. The manager has not enriched himself. Perhaps he has actually been too generous. He has scattered and wasted the master's goods. In a similar parable (in Matthew 25, 14-28 / Luke 19, 11-17) the good and faithful servants circulate their master's goods, they use them to increase in value - and are praised and shown by their master to be good examples.

There are differences in the two stories, but it is noticeable that the main characters and their behaviour are similar. If we see our parable as a metaphor, then the manager could be interpreted as someone who is reprimanded for being too generous with that which has been entrusted to him. But has he been dishonest? Has he been unjust? Jesus, who is telling the story, seems to be pointing a finger at the manager. But what is the main idea behind his words? Is he pointing at the manager, or is he in fact pointing at God? Is it possible that the teller of this story, Jesus, is actually talking about himself? Didn't he squander God's riches, waste them on tax-collectors and sinners? He gave them love, he accepted them, he was tolerant, generous, humble, warm, patient, friendly. He spoke forgiveness to them, ate with those who were outcasts from society, he touched lepers, healed the sick on the Sabbath - all this made people accuse him of squandering, wasting what had been entrusted to him.

We must remember that Jesus was a Jew and that in his society there were rules for behaviour, for interpersonal contact, for food, for religion. These rules regulated society, but they were frequently rules that were made and held for the sake of the rules. The Pharisees were very good at adhering to these rules, and Jesus' behaviour seemed to make a mockery of them. Jesus cannot / does not fit into this rigid society, and here we recognize Jesus' opponents: we hear that they demand that Jesus gives accountability for his deeds, justifies his actions before men, before Jewish society, religious and political leaders.

Let's follow this train of thought a little further: The man who has been accused of squandering his master's goods, continues to do so, in a very dedicated fashion. He goes on his way, determined to carry on with what he has been doing. He has been doing so for quite some time. But now the end of his work is fast approaching. He is to be removed from his position. There is no indication in our text that the manager has exceeded his job description. He is entitled to reduce debts. Our parable

also tells us that the manager makes friends, creates a community of relieved, freed human beings, saved from the consequences of their ever-increasing debt. But people do not want to let him carry on with the work he does so well, as the beloved Son who recognizes what has been entrusted to him as his own, namely you and me. And we know that the verdict on his fate has already been given, quite some time ago.

But then he relies on those whom he has healed with his message, whom he has lifted up and consoled, whom he has reconciled with God, his Father. He flees to them when his life and work are taken from him. The master in the parable, praises the manager because he has acted wisely. He has freed his debtors, his servants, us to carry on his work, to spread the word of forgiveness and liberation from sin.

To summarize then, we are the debtors, those who have great debts to pay, sins that weigh us down. But the borrower's note, the promissory note that one writes when one owes somebody something and that can take one to court for non-payment, has been taken from us, torn up, so to speak - or, as we read in Colossians 2, 14, set aside and nailed to the cross. At the same time, we belong to those at whose door the rejected Christ stands, pleading to be let in.

Our parable tells a story, a story from everyday life with all sorts of economic connotations; then it highlights what is actually behind this story of apparent wealth and greed; in the last instance it is the story of Jesus himself, a story that needs to be told again and again so that we can really ponder upon our lives, our relationships, our beliefs and hopes. And perhaps we can re-christen the heading of our sermon text. Instead of calling it the parable of the dishonest manager, let's substitute the words: "Managing injustice and unfairness with Christ."

Amen