



**Sermon preached by The Reverend Philippa White on 18 September 2016**

What on earth is Jesus trying to say?

This is an exceptionally confusing parable – partly because we can't work out who the goodies and the baddies are. We are hardwired to look for heroes and villains – but in this story, everybody behaves pretty shabbily. The master sacks the manager without investigating the reports he'd heard – just asking for an employment tribunal. The manager retaliates by halving the master's income for the coming year – he hasn't done himself any favours. And yet at the end, the master tells the manager he's done well. And we sit here saying "Jesus, what are you on about?" Whose side is Jesus on? Whose side should we be on?

But maybe that's where Jesus wants us to start. Parables, after all, are about the unexpected – the twist, the reversal, the subversion that pulls us up short and makes us realise we've got everything backwards. Maybe Jesus wants us to hear this parable and begin in confusion.

I think one of the things Jesus is trying to show us, with this parable, is that once people start caring about money more than people, there are no heroes any more.

The background to the situation the master and the manager are in – the background of everyone listening to Jesus – is rural poverty. In first-century Palestine, like many other societies then and now, there was huge inequality. A few very rich people – and a lot of very poor people. Then as now, people often ended up having to borrow money just to survive. And – then as now – the winners were always the rich. Like modern loan sharks, first-century landowners knew that those who came asking for a loan had no other options. So they slapped on punitive interest payments – despite the specific Jewish laws in Exodus, Leviticus AND Deuteronomy which told them not to. And the farmer who had lost his whole crop to disease – or the widow whose breadwinning eldest son had stopped sending money home – or the couple whose sick child had absorbed all their time and money – had no option but to agree.

So these are the kind of people we're dealing with, when we meet the master and the manager. A very rich man, not too bothered about the morality (or, indeed, legality) of what was being done in his name, just as long as he got richer. And a right-hand-man, content to do all the dirty work, and profiting by being part of a wealthy household.

Except, at the beginning of the story, that relationship is falling apart. There's been mismanagement and the right-hand-man is sacked. So what does he do?

Jesus' listeners would realise exactly what he's doing. He's not reducing debts at random – he's removing the interest, the profit. The person who'd borrowed 50 jugs of oil (we shouldn't

be thinking of a litre bottle, but a 10 gallon jar) only has to pay back 50, not 100. The person who'd borrowed 80 bushels of wheat only has to pay back 80, not 100.

He's doing something very like what the prophet Amos calls on people to do: stopping the exploitative business practices that run counter to the laws God has given them.

Now, the manager's motivation is pretty murky and his action hasn't put anything right in wider society. The poor are still poor. They might only have to pay back 50 jugs of oil – but the chances are they still won't be able to do it.

Maybe that's another reason the parable is confusing. And maybe that's another point of subversion and reversal: we realise that, even though the manager's praised, his action is empty. It doesn't go far enough. It might just help a couple of people – but it doesn't do anything about the unjust, dishonest society he's living in. It doesn't change the way the world works – and the way the world he lived in works is dishonest. Just as the society Amos lived in was dishonest – a society where people ignored the needs of others and focused on their own desire to make money. In Amos's society, and in the manager's, justice has been forgotten. All anybody seems to care about is making money at any expense.

But justice, as we see again and again in Scripture, is a characteristic of God. Justice is about a social order in which people are not exploited, oppressed and deprived. A social order where money is not everything. A social order where concern for others is fundamental.

God's laws, in the Old Testament, are all about creating that social order: a society where the decisions people make about what to do with their money, their land and their time are constrained by concerns about God and about other members of society. Laws like using fair weights; not imposing interest; leaving the bits of wheat at the edges of the field to be picked up by those who can't afford to buy bread; taking the Sabbath for rest and allowing your employees to do the same. Those are the laws which Amos sees broken in his society – and they were also being broken in Jesus' society.

Are they being kept in ours?

Jesus' parable, and the comments with which he finishes, tell us that what we do with our money – our property – our influence in society matter. They matter to us, they matter to God and they matter because everything we do either agrees with or protests against the society we're living in.

And our society, just as much as Amos's and Jesus', is unjust. It doesn't reflect the justice of God. It is, as Jesus puts it, a society of "dishonest wealth." Unfair contracts. Wages too low to live on. Tax dodging by the powerful. Starving people prosecuted for taking food from dustbins.

And as Jesus holds up a mirror to our society, he tells us that doing nothing isn't an option. Doing nothing puts us on the side of dishonest wealth, unjust social structures. Doing nothing makes us complicit.

Instead, we are called to live justly within an unjust society. To repent, perhaps as the manager did – and to act, as he did. But also to witness to God's laws; to use our money, our property, our vote in a way that honours justice. So that our lives of justice are beacons

of hope – making a small difference to those among whom we live and work, and shining as a large witness to a society where things can be different. Where people can matter. Where God's concern for every human person is honoured.