

Sunday 16 September 2016 St Peter's 8 am, St Luke's 9.30am

A Shrewd manager

Luke 16:1-13

Henry Ford, the man who got the world behind the wheels of his cars, was visiting his family's ancestral village in Ireland. Two trustees of the local hospital learned he was there, and managed to get an appointment to see him.

They talked Ford into giving the hospital five thousand dollars (this was the 1930's, so five thousand dollars was a great deal of money).

The next morning, Ford opened the daily paper and read the headline: "American Millionaire Gives Fifty Thousand to Local Hospital".

Ford summoned the two hospital trustees.

He waved the newspaper in their faces. "What does this mean?" he demanded. The trustees apologized profusely. "Dreadful error," they said.

They promised to get the editor to print a retraction the very next day, declaring that the great Henry Ford had given not fifty thousand, but only five.

Hearing this, Ford offered them another forty-five thousand, under one condition: that the trustees would erect a marble arch at the new hospital entrance with a plaque on it reading:

"I was a stranger and you took me in."

These two trustees took an opportunity that was right in front of them and used it to their best advantage. They remind me of the manager in today's gospel.

Some theologians have called today's reading the "hardest parable" to understand in all of the gospels. Preachers and scholars have gone through all kinds of contortions as they attempt to make sense of this parable which seems to make no sense.

Some commentators think that the parable may have got jumbled over the years and what we have now isn't really what Jesus said.

Others wonder if the manager was only reducing the exorbitant interest demanded by his boss and cutting it down to the legal limit.

Yet another explanation suggests that perhaps this manager was only cutting out his own commission so that what he did to make friends for himself was not dishonest after all.

But it seems to me that all these explanations are really commentators trying to wriggle out of an uncomfortable situation.

Jesus says the owner commends this dishonest manager.

However, he doesn't commend him for his *dishonesty*, but for his *shrewdness*.

The manager knew he'd been caught red-handed.

He knew that he didn't want to dig ditches or beg for bread, so he did something about his situation. He wasn't paralyzed by his problem, he took action. And that's what Jesus praises.

Jesus says 'the children of the light' should be shrewd, and decisive and take action.

Sometimes, when adversity comes our way we want to freeze up, pull the covers over our head and give up. We become overwhelmed by it all.

In the face of apparently insoluble problems of racism, world hunger, pollution, economic and social injustice we feel powerless. We say, "What can I do about it? It's far too big for me, I'm only one person."

And so we do nothing.

But Jesus uses this parable to tell us that's not the way to live.

Things look pretty hopeless for this manager when he's faced with being out in the street with no job and no references, but he acts decisively and shrewdly.

He moves from the defensive to the offensive, doing what he can to make friends for himself. Jesus says we too should be that shrewd, that astute, that decisive.

The New Testament frequently states that the future is God's future.

We're constantly to be open to God's coming among us, to be watchful; to be prepared and ready to move. We're not to be anxious about our lives, and worry about what tomorrow holds. Instead, we are called to trust in the one who holds tomorrow!

Jesus tells an apparently outrageous story about a man who makes some bold moves because he's convinced that his future is not yet fixed.

This manager took hold of his situation, wheeled and dealed and worked with it, trusting that even this could lead to some good.

He achieved a positive result - the praise of his master.

We come to the table with empty hands.

There, we receive just a tiny wafer, just a taste of wine.

It doesn't seem much to build a future on. But by the incredible graciousness of God, those symbols of ordinary, daily life become transformed into an amazing, sacramental, God-infused future.

And so we go forward, with eyes wide open, with fresh possibilities before us, to a future not of our own imagining, but a future that is a gift from God.

We can be confident that while we can't do everything, we can do something.

We can be sure that even when what we do is small it can make a difference, because little things do make a difference.

Jesus was always emphasizing the little things.

He said if we have faith the size of a mustard seed we can move mountains.

He said that unless we have the faith of a little child we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

He talked about the importance of giving a refreshing cup of water to someone who's thirsty.

And in this passage we hear that how we handle the little things is an indicator of how we will handle things of great magnitude,

because the little things you and I do really make a difference.

Voting in the local body elections makes a difference.

Contributing money to developing the mission and ministry of the church makes a difference.

Driving someone to visit a relative in hospital makes a difference.

Listening to someone who needs to talk makes a difference.

Welcoming a stranger, or even a regular member, to worship makes a difference.

Living out our faith in our relationship with family members, friends and fellow workers makes a difference. It won't make all the difference in the world, but it can make a world of difference in someone's life.

The shrewd manager in this parable took decisive action. Are we, today's 'children of the light', smart enough and decisive enough to do the same?

Are we putting our faith into action, taking risks and trusting that God will take care of the future?

Jesus often reminds us that the future is God's future; that we must always be open to God's coming among us, to be watchful, prepared and ready to act. We're not to be anxious about our lives and worry about what tomorrow holds.

Instead we are called to trust in the one who holds tomorrow!

With confidence in the power and grace of God, we can face whatever lies ahead, knowing that whilst we can't do everything we might dream of, we can do something.

And, we have the best possible resources to help us:

- our hope in God's justice, our faith in God's peace, and our trust in God's grace.

"And the master commended them because they acted so shrewdly."

(Acknowledgements: Paul L. Larsen)