

25th. Sunday in Ordinary Time

Some gospel stories are harder to understand than others. Many of us may have been scratching our heads over today's gospel, wondering why Jesus seems to be praising a clever but dishonest servant.

A key to understanding how to interpret gospel stories is to read them in their context. We are reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Luke has a particular sensitivity to the proper or improper use of material things. He helps us to notice how Jesus reaches out to the poorest in our community. He also often links one story with the next.

Last week we heard how the prodigal son wasted the material possessions that his father had given to him. He squandered his inheritance on reckless living. When his possessions ran out he was facing a pretty big crisis. Starving to death among the pigs he had to decide what to do to save himself. He decided to make his way back home and beg to become one of his father's paid servants. As we saw, he had badly underestimated the love his father had for him.

This week we again meet someone who has misused material possessions. He gets caught out because he has been dishonest in the way that he has handled the possessions that his master had entrusted to him. He is

about to get sacked. In the crisis that faces him he has to decide what to do to save himself. He decides that while he still has the authority to do so, he will write down the amount that people owe his master. He puts people in debt to him by gifting them with a heavy discount on the amount they would be expecting to pay back for the loans that they had received from his master. Now this is where it gets a bit tricky. Was he being dishonest here? To understand that, we need to know that the rich had a way of getting around the Jewish Law that forbade them charging interest on a loan. When they lent somebody something, they would write on their bill of loan an amount that was larger than what had actually been lent. When the loan was repaid more was demanded back than had been given. The steward may well have been just telling his customers to write down the amount that they had actually received from his merchant master.

The point of the story is that he was very clever and resourceful in the crisis in which he found himself. His master could not expose what he had done without exposing his own breaking of the law. He used the power and authority he still had to prepare for the future. He made sure that he had friends who would look after him when he lost his job. It was this cleverness that his master applauded. It was this cleverness that Jesus brings to our attention so that we can learn from it. "The

children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light.”

Jesus then expands on this by talking about how we should use money. “Use money to win you friends and thus make sure that when it fails you, they will welcome you into the tents of eternity.” This is so typical of how we hear Jesus speaking to us in Luke’s gospel about the use of material things. The things of this world only have value if they are used in the service of others. How we use material things and manage the wealth that is given to us is a test of how we will manage much greater treasure.

Jesus goes on to say, “The man who can be trusted in little things can be trusted in great. If you cannot be trusted with money, that tainted thing, who will trust you with genuine riches? And if you cannot be trusted with what is not yours, who will give you what is your very own? What Jesus says here may sound like a riddle to us. But it is worth taking the time to try to solve that riddle for ourselves. What are those genuine riches that Jesus speaks about? What is the gift that Jesus wants to give to us, the gift that we can call our own?

As people of faith we know that everything we have is gift from God. But what do we treasure most? Is it the gift of our own life? Is it the gift of belonging to a family

that loves and supports us? Is the treasure that we have found the very relationship that God has with us, a relationship of love that can never be broken, no matter what it is that we do? Are the genuine riches that Jesus speaks about the life that God has planted deep within us, a life that unites us with Jesus, a life that is our gift forever?

What Jesus says after that is perhaps a little clearer to us. We know that we cannot be slaves to material things and serve God at the same time. But the choice to serve God in everything that we do is a choice that we can only make when we have discovered the gift of his love for us. We can only use well the material possessions that we have when we can see them as things that have been lent to us for a while to be used to practice sharing the love that God has for us.