

Sermon preached by Canon Philip Banks  
Sunday 18 September 2016  
Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 20 Year C)  
*Readings: Luke 16:1-13; 1 Tim 2:1-8; Amos 8:4-7*

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At this time of Brexit muddle and uncertainty, you may have read in the summer of the British couple who won £61m in the EuroMillions Jackpot. Yesterday another British ticket holder won c£35m in the Euro Jackpot. If you'd won it how would you spend it? Would it be all on yourself? Would I know what to do with such a vast sum – I'm sure there'd be plenty of people ready to offer advice! Bill Gates and his wife or Mark Zuckerberg, and others, have decided to give most of their wealth away, following a centuries-old tradition of philanthropy.

We who make up the world-wide family of the church have been blessed with a very different gift, worth infinitely more - the gift the good news, the gos-pel, of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the same kind of question applies. How shall we share that gift? How shall we give it away and distribute it? For surely we cannot keep it all for ourselves! So writes Andrew Reid, director of the Royal School of Church Music, the RSCM, in the context of mission and outreach through church music. He recognises the urgency, as individuals and as groups, of sharing the priceless gift of the good news of Jesus, and using whatever means and media that is available, in the context that a church finds itself - in his case through music, whether traditional or modern.

The church's critics sometimes accuse us that faith and worship simply start and stop on a Sunday. Yet we know that it must carry on in our daily living as we encounter others. The church is here (we are here) to reach out with God's love the message of salvation for all. It's that which has been central to church life since the very beginning. It's that - how do we share this precious gift of the news of Jesus - that's concentrating the minds of those who lead this diocese and churches and dioceses across England in the face of continuing decline in church membership. The archbishops of Canterbury and York will again asking Christians across denominational boundaries to pray at Pentecost next year (just as this year) that we may be, to quote, "Effective Witnesses to God the Son Jesus Christ". (You can Google the 'Thy Kingdom Come' website). It's right that the archbishops should instil in us all an urgency.

It's urgent - not because we want to build numbers, or to shore up our finances, or extol the benefits of belonging, or to convince others that we are a successful place (however you define success). Rather it's what Bertrand Russell wrote towards the end of his life, when his lifelong antipathy to Christianity was softening. He wrote "the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable. Nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have taught. Love. Whatever does not spring from this love is harmful and useless". They are words which challenge all Christians, you and me, that we will eventually be judged according to the extent of our love and charity.

Speaking of challenge, what of Jesus' parable which we heard in our Gospel reading today? Different writers have given the

parable a variety of titles: “the shrewd manager”, “the unjust steward” to name a couple. What thoughts went through your mind as you heard it? You be forgiven for wondering, as plenty of others have: Did Luke write it down correctly? Jesus can't have told it quite like this? Perhaps there is some error in translation and the copying of the texts by scribes centuries ago?

On the face of it three things happen: first someone is put in charge of his employer's business - the Steward who, it seems had not been doing his job properly, and knew he was about to get the sack. Then second - what does he do? He calls all those who owe his master money, and gets them to settle their accounts... but gives them all a massive discount, swindling his employer of what he's owed - in the hope that (because he doesn't fancy begging or digging up roads) the debtors will be so grateful to him that they'll offer him a job and home.

Then, thirdly: the employer arrives on the scene - and just as you're expecting him to sack the manager (and by the way be very cross because he's lost even more money) we hear these gospel words: “the master commends the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly”. Then Jesus' words, “the children of this age and more shrewd than are the children of light”; and “make friends by means of dishonest wealth so that when it's gone they will welcome you into the eternal homes”.

How confusing.

Parables always tell us something about the nature of God and of God's will for us; they are to make think, and to challenge us. Rabbinic parables about a ‘master and a steward’ are a metaphor for God (master) and his people Israel (steward). So in this Parable Jesus is not commending scheming behaviour or

dishonest business dealings. Rather it's the turning point of the parable that is the key. The steward's predicament has concentrated his mind. He is up against it. He's facing a dark future. Urgent action is needed. Like Amos in today's first reading, Jesus is warning God's people of imminent disaster, the approach of which calls into question past ways of doing things. Jesus is talking to God's chosen ones who are supposed to be God's ‘property manager’, the lights of the world, set over his possession. But Israel has failed in the task. The Pharisees had been pulling rules and regulations tighter and tighter mistakenly thinking that it would somehow make them more holy! It's what fundamentalists do (whether Christian or in other faiths), and it simply has the effect of excluding. Excluding the very people that Jesus wants to reach out to - those on the edge, the poor, unacceptable, the unorthodox.

Did Jesus speak this challenging parable because he knew that it would need to be heard by the people of God, not just then, but in every generation – ours included? The Church constantly passes through turbulent times but has always found ways of ensuring that the gospel message shines through by adapting to the culture and context in which it is set. But the last century has seen change - society, culture, technology, media, values – change at an extraordinary rate, and mainstream churches have struggled to keep up. Is God speaking to us through parables like today's – asking us: have we been good stewards of his priceless gifts, or have we become complacent, lazy - letting personal and corporate opportunities of prayer and action and ministry slip through our fingers? Do we have a real and personal sense of

urgency, like the steward of today's story? The steward might have been defective, but he had his wits about him. He made swift decisive plans, used his imagination, so that even the master defrauded couldn't help congratulating him!

“The children of this age are more shrewd”, Jesus says, “than the children of light”. Is Jesus saying to us – you're not as savvy, clever as the children of the world? Do we, the Children of Light, have anything like the enterprising spirit and ingenious resourcefulness of “children of this age” shown by the steward in the story. As one writer puts it: “when we take council together concerning the things of the kingdom, do we show fearless inventiveness”?

The good news (pardon the pun) is that under Bishop Martin's leadership this diocese is indeed grappling with these things - with a sense of urgency. Some of you will be aware of the *Growing in God* work with its four strands which congregations are engaging with. Cathedrals are being asked by the Association of English Cathedrals to look afresh at our own vision and strategy – thank you to those of you who have contributed to the Self Evaluation Framework over the summer in various ways. That's being drawn together soon, and, included in that, our Chapter and department heads are spending a day this week examining our working styles and personalities so that we can know each others' strengths and weaknesses better and support each other in the vital work of ministry and mission here which forms part of the wider tapestry across the county. One aspect of our contribution to the wider picture is in the Music Outreach

Project, which the Foundation of St Edmund is funding, to help parishes and congregations who struggle with music - music which is so essential in bringing alive our worship.

As stewards of this priceless gift of the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ, entrusted to us: how will I share it? How will you play your part in passing on this faith, with its rich heritage of prayer, worship, teaching and wisdom? How am I using my time and energy? How do you use yours? What percentage is spent in prayer, maturing and exploring your faith, deepening my relationship with God?

May we be shrewd 'children of light' who have a sense of urgency about us – urgency to be people of prayer, who through our deep knowledge of God's love, reach out with God's love, making his love known to all.

William of Thierry, 12<sup>th</sup>-century Cistercian, wrote these words which I'll leave you with, about the effect of prayer:

“Love of the truth drives us from the world to God in prayer. The truth of love [which we discover there] sends us back from God to the world”.

Canon Philip Banks 18/09/2016  
*Check against delivery*