

Swindling The World

Today's parable is one of the most shocking of Jesus' stories (it isn't by anybody else - no-one would dare). It teaches us something about the correct way to read a parable.

The Man's A Crook

Yes - he's a complete wash-out as a steward, and when he hears the sack beating its wings towards him, he decides to turn against his very trusting master and swindle him. You are meant to be shocked, and I would guess that the original hearers of the story were shocked. But they knew they were listening to a parable, so they went with it, waiting for further enlightenment: why would any rabbi tell such a scurrilous story? Jesus' account of the inner working of the steward's mind is masterly. We can tell that he could read people like a book! He builds the character up in so few strokes: *Dig? Don't make me laugh...beg? Ugh!* - and then the idea which is actually the heart of the parable: *Ah...I know what I will do....*

The Point Of The Story

The story hinges on one amazing stroke of luck. The steward's master has been pretty stupid in letting a waster like this have charge of his goods. But his method of dismissal is the height of his stupidity. Instead of seizing the keys of the jam-cupboard and escorting his ex-employee off the estate, *he lets him know* that he's been exposed, and leaves him *with his hand in the till*. This is what enables the steward to change horses in midstream, and to become the ally of his former debtors.

And So I Tell You This

Jesus now moves to draw his conclusion. The point is clear: we are the sacked stewards. We secretly know that the world won't, and indeed can't, reward our loyal service to it. The world uses people on a strictly limited basis. Like middle-aged footballers, or Skegness in February, we know we are sacked as surely as the man in the story. Jesus is telling us to move on, cut our losses, take a hard look at the future and *change horses*. We too have still got our hands in the till, and yet we know that the boss (the one Jesus calls *the Prince of this World*) is plotting our downfall. We have to turn coats, and start to make friends with his victims, so that when we are "dismissed from office" - there's a nice phrase for "dead" - we shall have powerful

friends who will make room for us in their houses. Who are the friends we need to cosy up to? The ones who benefit from Luke's Magnificat: *He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly and meek: he has filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away with nothing*". No-one can tell me that Luke was a doctor. I don't think so. He was a stockbroker. His language is that of a watcher of the market: a wizard investor. He is looking, not for a prudent investment which will yield a modest return over a period of years, but an ugly duckling which will suddenly break cover and soar, meteorically, into the ether; a messianic miracle stock which will make an overnight fortune. Thus the urgency of the story: my present situation is doomed. I have to risk everything on saving the future. That is what the Kingdom of Heaven demands.

So What About Us?

The unmistakable note of this story is the element of subversion. From the beginning the Christian Church has had about it a sort of anarchy towards the world. You can read it in the courage of the martyrs, who bravely withstand the demands of kings and dictators because of their untouchable hope for eternity. You can sense it in the lives of prophets, who speak the word of God, welcome or unwelcome, whole and entire. In the most intimate space, you can be aware of the dogged determination of people who hope against hope for goodness in a sinful world, refusing to break their promises, insisting on forgiveness of their enemies, and persisting in the work of Christ in the teeth of enthroned opposition. Inheriting from our Jewish forebears, such people know instinctively that they must contradict the world. They may not appear in newspapers or attract public comment. But they are sapping remorselessly at the heartlessness of the world, and those altered bonds are already quietly changing hands, as people renounce anger, forgive trespass, restore relationship, and heal past wounds. They are obeying a different authority from the world about them: they are foreigners on a mission. We mistake them if we think of them as conventional, old-fashioned, or conforming. They are sleepers, they are dangerous to the way the world is.

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