

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Your Hand Is Still In The Till

Most of us have a brush with death from time to time. I remember once missing a suddenly-swerving juggernaut by a margin I could not perceive; I assured myself I hadn't died, and then the shock of *what might have been* hit me like a punch in the midriff. Once I took apart an adaptor I'd ineffectively rewired, and stuck in my inquisitive screwdriver. A tiny wave of electricity tingled from a wire I'd brushed, and I suddenly realised the whole apparatus was still plugged in to the mains. The feeling that runs over you as you realise that *you could have died* is a memorable moment. If you've had a heart-attack, a stroke, or the diagnosis of a serious illness, you will know what I mean.

Luke's realism

Life in the New Testament world was more precarious than ours; sudden or early death was more the norm than the exception. Luke's Jesus finds urgent inspiration in this fact. You're living on borrowed time, he seems to say, get your deeds right while you still have your independence; use the time you have left to the best advantage. In the Gospel today he likens us to a discredited steward who is in an extraordinary, indeed, unlikely position: he knows he's sacked, and that he has no more to expect from his present employer: *but he's still got his hand in the till*. What a bonus! While he still has power, he makes friends with his master's debtors, knowing that he will shortly join them - in debt, and without income.

Is Jesus commending a crook?

The point of the parable? Not the crookedness of the steward, but his craftiness. It's easy to be disgusted by the world when you have become a loser in the world's lottery; but you can also turn against it *while you're winning*. St Thomas More is typical of the canonized martyrs, in that his gift of his life for Christ was made so *freely*. He was highly-placed in the world, a winner, and he ruled as Henry VIII's Chancellor. He sacrificed all this in obedience to the voice of conscience. The *freedom* of that choice was what revealed its sincerity: after all, many have been crushed by evil kings without being martyrs: Thomas Cromwell, whose part in the death of More is notorious, was himself beheaded five years later; his cause for canonization has never been introduced! To refuse the motives of the world *while we still have power in it* puts us in the same position as the steward in the Gospel.

"Use money to win you friends!"

Here is divine advice for anyone who has money. You can lay it out no better than in the making of friends with the poor: on condition that you aren't to be paid back by them. You are using your freedom excellently; you are rebelling against the world that praises what's acquisitive and selfish. It's an investment, whose return is deferred to God's time: you have invested in the kingdom of heaven. That this option has been taken because of a tip-off gives it particular allure: you are ahead of the field, you have had insider-information. But of course, the information is already clearly to be seen and understood: where will the tycoons of today, and all their ambition, be in thirty years' time?

Final Judgment

The concept of a last judgment sometimes appears to me as a resumé of many nightmares: the dream about going on stage, only to realise you have not learned the lines and do not even know the plot: or the one about appearing in church or in Sainsbury's, and slowly realising you have forgotten to put your clothes on. Christ asks: *What investment did you make in the poor, while your hand was in the till?* What chance do I have of a convincing answer? The wonder of the parable is, that our future frantic search for evidence of our gifts to the poor on Judgment Day bears a curious likeness to our present casting-about for the increase of our wealth. It seems we require little change of character, only a total change of direction; death, or life.

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