

A Sermon preached on the parable of the Unjust Steward
before the Election of the Lord Mayor
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The parable of the untrustworthy steward is not most preachers' favourite text and is generally avoided. My own view is that every priest who is considered for a parish in this City should be required to engage with the text at interview; now that will slim down the shortlists to the comfort of churchwardens! We are hearing much about trust of late and the Lord Mayor rightly points out that this gift, which is a precondition for reliable and ethical business cannot be switched on; that which is lost in a moment requires the proper ground in which to flourish again. Bad apples may be the cause of sweeping public perception, but they are not necessarily readily identified. Of course it is necessary to make distinctions between people, judgements even - and they can be fraught with hazard. Recently, having had my wallet stolen I was asked in a police telephone interview to describe my build in order to eliminate me from the CCTV footage, 'Was I', I was quizzed, 'thin, medium or fat'. I counselled the constable against the use of 'fat' as potentially derogatory and was assured that no one else had complained. It may be wondered whether, in our perverse culture anyone would object to the epithet 'untrustworthy' or 'unjust'.

One interpretation of the parable points to an ingenuity every bit as creative as any instrument invented in and around our streets. The Jewish Law forbade the taking of interest from other Jews on loans, yet where a loan could be structured such that it was more in the shape of a business partnership, the action was not usurious. Everyone had oil and wheat and so they were most commonly used for this sleight of hand. The steward was thus more than within his rights to remove the interest element on the loan to ensure its closer conformity to the Law and acquire for himself some friends in the process. Jesus thus commends the fact that business people may be more creative in a crisis than the 'children of light'.

This parable only appears in S. Luke's Gospel and we may wonder at the motives for its preservation and careful setting down - and the further the Church travelled from the Jewish Law the more it seemed that Jesus was here applauding dishonesty. Of course the parable was added to those others in which Jesus seemed to give advice on the handling of wealth - to use what is only on trust to us to strengthen friendship may not seem so far from the kingdom.

But the flavour of the tale also reminds us of the mixed character of life where good intentions and evil objects exist side by side and may not always be readily separable. Be we ever so trustworthy we still have to deal with those who are not. Winston Churchill evinced, 'You may do a very wise thing and it may turn out most badly. You may do a foolish thing and it may save your life'.

Elsewhere Jesus warns of doing damage to the one - the wheat - by destroying the other - the tares - too soon. And in Christian devotion the admixture of good and evil is seen as governed by the notion of providence. Thus - and typically - the story of Joseph (of technicolour dream

coat fame) and his brothers, in which the one cruelly betrayed becomes the instrument of the salvation of his brothers. Good comes out of evil because kindly Providence prevails; and there is more than a suggestion of the dynamic by which Jesus also saves us, although we have betrayed him.

Providence was a more explicit category in earlier centuries than in ours (though Churchill certainly believed in it); Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* has his hero specifically reflect that his survival (when his shipmates are drowned) is intended by a generous God - and leads to the ultimate rescue of others.

In Christian believing none of us is good, virtuous and true – all of that is ascribed to us because we are to be treated as if there was more Christ in us than there is of ourselves. We are saved from judgementalism because we look at the Christ in one another. To trust God, which is the root of all trust, is not just to have a sense of the promise of my own life but of that of others; and over time the advantage of our entire human family.

The poet Edwin Muir had an idyllic childhood on Orkney from which he acquired a very strong sense of the longed for Garden of the book Genesis; in a poem 'One foot in Eden' he laments the mixed character of the human condition,

Evil and good stand thick around, in fields of charity and sin...

But then wonders whether, beyond Eden there isn't something greater than even Paradise could offer,

*But famished field and blackened tree
Bear flowers in Eden never known.
Blossoms of grief and charity
Bloom in these darkened fields alone.
What had Eden ever to say
Of hope and faith and pity and love...*

*Strange blessings never in Paradise
Fall from these beclouded skies.*

Was there, he asks, love in Paradise, in Eden, or is our ability to love a product of our messed-up human condition?

The unjust steward buys friends by fraud or good sense; we love not because we are good, but because the bad demands that we dilute and mitigate it. And where we love, there Christ assuredly is.