

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel reading today, is one of those stories that you might at first sight think – What on earth is a story like that doing in the Bible?

Likewise, one might ask – why on earth is Jesus telling a story like that?

As Christians, we are called to be straightforward, honest, trustworthy. Why is Jesus seeming to undermine all of that and tell us a story about a man who is going to be made redundant and so fiddles the books, and to add insult to injury the very boss who he is cheating seems to think he's been sensible and commends him.

What is this all about?

It would be very tempting to avoid preaching on this passage, but, like all Scripture, when we look closely, there is much that we can learn, and I would like to share with you, three key thoughts that arise from this passage.

Firstly, the passage shows us how easy it is for bad habits to become embedded in our lives, and to influence our attitudes and actions to such an extent that they control us.

The steward in Jesus' story was unreliable and dishonest. It is obvious that he had been so for quite some time. It probably started off in little ways, but eventually became a way of life. He must have known all along that he was living dangerously. But he got a way with it for a long time, evading public judgement and the need for self examination. However, in spite of being so street wise, he was eventually caught out, and his master confronted him with this misconduct.

It must have been an embarrassing and painful moment for the steward. He was about to lose not only his job, but also his reputation. He had brought shame and disgrace on himself and those around him.

However, this was also a moment of truth and revelation, because it showed him the dishonest reality in which he had been living. It provided him with an opportunity to leave behind illusion and lies. It could have been a real turning point in his life.

But what happened? The man had learned nothing from it. Even after being sacked from his job he continued with his old dishonest ways. There wasn't the slightest change in his character. He refused to take responsibility for the type of person he had become.

Old habits die hard.

When I was vicar on the Isle of Wight, we lived in a Rectory with several very large oak trees in the front garden. Each autumn, acorns would drop to the ground. Although we did our best to clear them from the grass, inevitably, some become embedded, and in the spring, would send down roots and appear as young oak trees.

Whilst very small, it was possible to pull these up single handed. If allowed to stay in the ground for a year or two – the roots went much deeper and made it necessary to use two hands. If we had left the saplings in the ground for several more years, it would probably have need two people to pull them up. After 10 or 20 years, there would be no hope of pulling the saplings out by hand – they would need to be felled with an axe – even that would leave the roots in the ground to sprout again, unless they were dug out.

That's how it is with habits. In the beginning, before they have sunk deep roots, it is easy to deal with them, and remove them. But if we allow them to sink deep roots, it can become virtually impossible to rid ourselves of them.

This is presumably what happened with the steward in Jesus' story. He had become so used to a dishonest way of life that he couldn't change. However, what seems impossible to us, can become possible with the help of God's grace – his love and forgiveness.

Although in the story we see the danger of bad habits, it also points to the fact that good habits can grow and take hold in the same way. Just as dishonesty can become a way of life, honesty can also become habitual, spontaneous and second nature.

The second thing that I think we gain from this story, is a vivid demonstration of the way in which a love of money can corrupt.

It is all too clear that in our society a greed for money causes the downfall of many people. Whether they are in government, heading up a large bank, or a top executive in any organisation – over the years there have been many high profile incidents where individuals have been found guilty of putting their greed for money above honesty and integrity, and indeed the needs of others.

Given the importance of money in our society, it is all too easy for us to treat it a little like a god, and put our quest for money above honesty, before justice and sometimes even before family life.

If we allow it to do so, money can distort our perspective on life, and cause us to focus on the wrong priorities.

There is a story about a rich and rather selfish man who went to a rabbi for a blessing. The rabbi greeted him in a friendly manner and brought him into his living room. Then he led him to the window which looked out onto the street and told him to tell him what he saw.

“I see people walking about” the rich man answered.

The rabbi took him away from the window and placed in front of him a large mirror. “Look into the mirror and now tell me what you see.”

“I see myself,” the man replied.

The rabbi spoke – “let me explain to you the meaning of this, my friend...”

The window is made of glass, as is the mirror. However, the glass of the mirror has a veneer of silver on it. When you look through plain glass you see people.

But when you cover it up with silver you stop seeing others, and see only yourself.

When you are concerned only with money, you stop seeing others and see only yourself.”

The third thing that I think this story shows us – perhaps the most important thing – is that Jesus has a good understanding of us as human beings. He knows what real people are like. His stories are strikingly true to reality – and so his message hits home.

We all know people who cut a corner or two. Most of us know someone down the street who is always able to get anything cheap. These sorts of people are often caricatured in various soap operas.

When we come across a TV character like Del Boy in “Only Fools and Horses” – we might think of him as a lovable rogue – and even find his cheek amusing.

The steward in the story is a little bit like one of these characters.

The boss in the story is not much better. He sacks the steward before he has had a chance to defend himself and then applauds the steward’s dodgy dealing – we might well think that he has done a dodgy deal in his time as well.

Jesus could have told a story about nice people, about people who were very spiritual. He doesn't. He tells a story about real people. He tells a story that strikes a chord with our own experience.

In doing so, he reveals some important insights into our society and helps us to see the ways in which dishonesty and selfishness can damage our relationships and make it difficult to know who to trust.

As we think about our Gospel reading this morning, let's hold onto these three key themes and reflect on them during the course of the coming week.

Are there any habits – any things in our lives that we need to root out before they take a hold on us, and start to have a negative influence in our spiritual lives? It might be a difficulty in a relationship with someone. It might be an attitude towards particular situations. It might be something that takes time and energy away from the things that are truly important in our lives.

Is there anything that is preventing us from seeing and responding to the needs of others? This question applies just as much to us as a church community, as it does to us individually. We can become very inward looking, and concerned about our needs to raise money for the maintenance of our buildings – in doing this, we must ensure that we never lose sight of our true calling, which is to be the eyes of Christ looking out on the world with compassion, so that we can be the hands that do his work, the feet that take his message of love and forgiveness wherever it is needed, and the heart through which his love flows.

Finally, are our spiritual lives rooted and grounded in reality – as the stories and illustrations of Jesus show that they must be?

Our faith is only meaningful if it impacts on our everyday lives and carries through into our relationships at home, at work, within the family of the church and within the wider community.

Jesus entrusts us with the responsibility of making his love present here and now,
today and every day
in everything that we do.

Are we going to be faithful stewards, or are we going to be those who short change others?

Are we going to be stewards who honestly face up to the things that we get wrong and put them right, or are we going to carry on in the same old way?

Are we going to be stewards who put our responsibility to serving our master first, or those who look after our own interests?

I would like to leave you with a story about a young pastor in the United States, who felt called to take up a new ministry in a church in a different state.

Shortly after he had arrived in the town, he was travelling on the bus. He got on, paid the money to the driver and sat down. He soon realised that he had been given a quart too much in his change.

He thought to himself, what should I do?

Do I go to the driver and tell him?

Do I think of it as a gift from God and keep it

- after all it is only a quart?

When he reached his stop, he got up and walked along the bus. He hesitated as he reached the driver and after a short pause reached out his hand and said – “here you are you gave me a quart too much in my change.”

The driver replied – “You’re the new minister in town aren’t you. I’ve been thinking about coming along to church, and I put the extra money in your change to see what you would do! I’ll see you in church on Sunday!”

Wherever we go – our words, our actions reveal the things that are important to us.

Wherever we go, our words and actions need to reflect our loyalty and commitment to following in the way of Christ.

Amen.