

Sermon preached by Rev Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

Pentecost 15C OS 25 Proper 20 Season of Creation

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What will I do?

Acting Shrewdly with generosity for God's creation

Of all the parables that Jesus tells this must be one of the most discombobulating!

Of all the stories and teaching that Jesus gives, this is one of the most perplexing.

Unlike other stories, I don't think we'll ever see a stained glass window dedicated to a dishonest rogue manager.

What sort of example is the dishonest manager?

What are we to make of it?

Parables are not morality tales.

They are not meant to have one moral to the story and the dishonest manager is not a squeaky clean character who is a great example to follow.

A question to think about is where the dishonesty of the manager lies. It is easy to think it is on display when he cuts the bill of the debtors, yet the rich man calls the rogue to account for squandering his property *before* this.

Judgement is hanging over his head.

He is a rogue because he has squandered the rich man's property.

People would've pricked up their ears at the accusation of squandering because Jesus has just told the story of the Father and the two sons, where the prodigal son has squandered his Father's property and is destitute with the pigs.

Here we see the squandering one faced with a moment of crisis and decision as his role is going to be taken away from him.

What will I do? He asks.

He faces the reality of his situation. He is going to lose his position and influence. He will be shamed before people.

He is realistic about what he can do and what he can't do – he's not strong enough to dig and too ashamed to beg.

He decides that relationships, having friends, are more important than money.

He endures short term pain for long term gain.

He approaches his master's debtors and takes off his own cut. To preserve his long term future. He acts generously to the debtors instead of grasping as much as he can in the short term. So that he will have friends to welcome him.

They will remember his act of generosity towards them.

The rich man praises him for what he has done because he has not clung to what he can hold onto in the short term but has used it to win friends that will serve him in his coming hour of need.

He has acted shrewdly.

This parable then says something about the great reversal that is coming in God's reign.

The rogue has acted violently against his own immediate interest to preserve his long-term future. He strips away his wealth generously in order to invest in relationships.

The rogue is shrewd in how he faced the crisis and what he does in response. He moves from clinging onto what he has to being generous in forgiving debts. The key to the story is him asking the question what will I do?

He makes the decision to be generous.

Judgement may be coming, but how he lives and acts matters.

Jesus came among us to live as one of us and to gave himself generously for our sakes.

When Jesus reaches his final point of decision he agonized in the garden he says what will I do?

Will I ask for this cup to be taken from me? No he acts with generosity of love to give his life for us.

I wonder where in life you have been faced with a crisis, a point of decision where you needed to change direction and act differently?

When you look back were you able to make a shrewd decision?

Where have you been able to change direction from holding on to everything you've got to being generous?

I wonder whether you are facing a moment of decision, a moment of crisis now and what might be God's invitation in it.

We are living in a time of change and challenge that faces us with many points of decision.

How are we being invited to act shrewdly as Christians?

How do we make decisions that open us up to God and others with generosity rather than clinging to what we have got in fear.

How are we being invited to act like the scoundrel in this story.

Life is not as clear as black and white, good deserving people and bad undeserving people. We are all have such mixed motivations vulnerabilities and weaknesses, fear and trust, stinginess and generosity.

I wonder what this say to us as custodians of this planet at this time.

Hildegard of Bingen's understanding of God was grounded in a creation centred spiritual tradition. She saw a close relationship between earth and humanity. She saw creation as cosmic blessing and sin as the rupture of the cosmos.

She said 'creation blooms and flourishes when it remains in right relationship and keeps to its assigned tasks. The breaking of right relationship is injustice and all injustice represents a rupture in the cosmos itself.'

We are faced with a changing climate, with an environment and its creatures and peoples under strain.

I think we are faced with a point of decision about how we are asked to respond which may have short term pain for the long term preservation of the gift of God's creation.

I was moved by the story of the owner of Patagonia clothing who is leaving his entire fortune to be used for the preservation of the planet.

There are choices we each can make as to what has long term value. How can we act generously in ways that will preserve our world?

How can we act shrewdly in the decisions we make to be God's partners in the care of our planet and of our fellow creatures and habitats?

As Terry Tempest Williams says:

The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint, that we might leave room for the life that is destined to come. To protect what is wild is to protect what is gentle. Perhaps the wilderness we fear is the pause between our own heartbeats, the silent space that says we live only by grace. Wilderness lives by this same grace. Wild mercy is in our hands.

A closing prayer:

Bountiful God,
you call us to labour with you in tending the earth:
Where we lack love, open our hearts to the world;
where we waste, give us discipline to conserve;
where we neglect, awaken our minds and wills
to insight and care.

May we with all your creatures honour and serve you in all things for you live and reign with Christ, Redeemer of all, and with your Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*Lections:
Jeremiah 8.18-9.1
Psalm 79.1-9
1 Timothy 2.1-7
Luke 16.1-13*