

## Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> September 2022

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.  
God is ever present, around us and within us,  
we worship together in God.

**Readings**                    1 Timothy 2:1-7  
                                      Luke 16:1-8

### Reflection

Our reading from Luke includes a parable. Parables are stories which have certain qualities and Jesus used them a lot. They are not moral tales like Aesop's fables, rather they are stories designed to shock the listeners into reflecting on life, their actions and which often challenge the status quo of religious life.

Mark includes 8 parables, Matthew tells 21 parables and Luke has 28 parables but 7 of the 8 parables told in Mark are also told in both Matthew and Luke, and 4 of the parables told in Matthew also appear in Luke, however there are 10 parables unique to Matthew 1 unique to Mark and 17 parables unique to Luke. John has no parables!

William Bausch (Storytelling: Imagination and Faith) suggests that the parables original context and impact is one of a newly emerging culture engaging with an established orthodox one, and confronting it with its inevitable demise. The parables are transitional stories intended to disturb and challenge the hearers and motivate them to move into a radically new way of engaging with the world and the call of the times.

Jesus message was about the new reign of God, an invitation to work towards a new world order marked by right relationships of justice, love, compassion and liberation. It is new in its essential nature, global in its geography and practical in its application. The only place this new order can unfold is the world and if not here then nowhere!

Parables work in different ways, they

- Uncover our competitiveness and envy and invite us into relationships instead
- Uncover our wrong centring and invite us into right centring
- Uncover our need to hoard and invite us to share and include
- Uncover our assumptions and invite us to turn them around
- Uncover our timidity and invite us to risk all for the sake of God's Kingdom
- Uncover our self-centredness, despair and distrust and invite us to hope.

The parable we have heard today is widely recognised as the most difficult to understand and it continues to baffle academics. We have a rich man, a manager and some debtors. The manager's position is threatened as the rich man believes he has been managing his property poorly and he knows he is going to be sacked, he also knows that he has no other useful skills and fears he will be destitute and friendless. He devises a plan, he will reduce the debts of his employers clients and they will look kindly on him in the future. He puts the plan into action but of course the rich man finds out but rather than being angry we are told he commends the manager for his creativity!

Theologian Tom Wright reminds us that all may not be as it seems. Jews were forbidden from lending money at interest but many got around this by dealing in oil and wheat and charging higher prices or accounting creatively by recording more barrels sold than received. It is possible that the manager reduced the debts to their true figure which would have pleased the clients and the rich man would have been unable to challenge it without admitting to breaking the law. However, Tom Wright explores this parable from another angle recognising that it is a parable and not a simple moral story. First century Jewish stories were often about the relationship between God and Israel

and he suggests that we might see the rich man as God, and the manager as Israel. Israel has a poor reputation, charged with being a light to the nations, that is setting a good example, its history was littered with failures and throughout Scripture we read of Israel being threatened with dismissal from its special place. That certainly ties in with the place of the manager in the story. The response of the Pharisees, the religious leaders, was to continually tighten the rules, adding more and more laws and Jesus on more than one occasion challenged this approach, seeing it as excluding the very people God was calling Israel to embrace. So, this parable could be aimed at the Pharisees, suggesting that they need to remove the extra bits of law, they could through caution to the wind and begin making friends.

In the parables we see a natural reaction to adversity, save your skin, look after yourself, make friends for the future and this is what Jesus feels Israel needs to do, instead of hoarding money and land they should use it for the benefit of others, and make friends, to build relationships which is how we build the kingdom. Now Tom Wright is the first to admit that this is just a possible interpretation but it certainly fits with the essence of what a parable is meant to do.

We read parables all the time and we try to interpret them for our own time and place, so, we must ask ourselves if we impose extra restrictions on those who would seek to follow Jesus? Do we interpret the gospel as a narrow and exclusive way or do we follow the example of Jesus and generously include everyone in God's love? Perhaps it is time we threw caution to the wind and became more creative as church. Covid brought many challenges both to society and church. Things changed and we face a different future. There is acceptance that Covid accelerated an inevitable change but it also introduced new ideas and new skills. We cannot go back to the life that was because life is a journey and a journey means you are moving forward, but we do still have a life to live. We are called to embrace the change and build a new future.

Right now the whole country is experiencing a change most of us have never experienced before, the changing of the monarch. We are saddened at the late Queen's death but we must embrace a new reign and welcome the King. Within Heartland we face change as fewer ministers are available for deployment and we will have to learn to share ministry in a different way. Mid-Herts is currently without a minister and whilst it would be reassuring to think that it is automatic that the status quo of the past will continue, the reality is that it won't change must happen. Within Luton and Dunstable the five churches in the cluster are exploring a new life together as they look to become one church with two buildings, one in Luton and one in Dunstable. They are exploring sharing resources and working together, enabling new and exciting outreach. This is not settling for the inevitable but instead embracing a new future and building new relationships. They are being the manager and creatively building an alternative vision of the future.

Throughout this prayer is the foundation, prayerful consideration, prayerful decision making and a prayer filled vision of reaching out to others to bring the Kingdom closer. In our reading from Timothy we are reminded that attitude is as important as words. The church is being urged to build relationships with society and to recognise the civil authorities in their prayers. We are not to set ourselves apart but reach out and be love within the challenges of life. How we respond to the challenges we face says as much if not more about our faith than our presence in church.

As Welwyn Garden City United church celebrates its anniversary there is thanksgiving for the past, there is a celebration of the present but there should also be an embracing of the future in a creative and faith filled way. We have hope and as we journey the scenery may change but our destination is the kingdom, a vision of unity and oneness, justice and peace. We are called to be catalysts of change by demonstrating a willingness to change and to build new relationships.

Let me finish with a story

One bright, sunny day, two pieces of paper were sunbathing in the midday warmth, enjoying the pleasures of the summertime. One piece of paper was called Pure-White. She was pure white, and so very proud of her pristine purity. 'Look at me,' she said to her companion. 'Did you ever see such

a beautifully white piece of paper?' Her companion was called Bright-Light. She too was amazingly white and wonderfully free from the slightest stain. The two pieces of paper outshone each other in the midday sunlight.

As they lay there, a figure appeared upon the horizon. He caught their attention and they watched as he came ever closer.

'Who can that be?' asked Pure-White.

'What is he carrying in his arms?' wondered Bright-Light.

When the figure was only a few yards away from the two paper-friends they noticed that in his arms, he carried a palette and paintbrushes. They saw in his eyes a curious, dream-like light. A love-light, but gentle. Looking through his eyes they saw into his heart where he carried a dream.

'What do you think he wants?' Pure-White asked Bright-light. Then as realisation dawned she added, 'You don't think he is going to paint on us, do you?'

Bright-Light flinched, as the words sank in. 'I think that is exactly what he wants to do,' she murmured.

'There's no way that I will allow him to paint on me,' railed Pure-White. 'No painter is going to spoil my purity'

'But what if he is a master-artist?' Bright-Light reflected. 'He might create a masterpiece on our pure white emptiness. He might make us into masterpieces.'

'But then again,' said Pure-White, 'he might make a complete mess of us. No. I'm not taking any risks like that. I'm going to stay pure until the day I die.'

Then the artist approached both pieces of paper and asked their permission to paint his dream upon their pure whiteness.

Pure-White said, 'No way!' And she remained pure white, and empty, until the day that the wind and the weather finally turned her back into pulp.

Bright-Light said, 'Do as you will with me. I trust you. I open myself to your hands.' And the artist turned her into a masterpiece - a unique and beautiful representation of the dream that he was carrying in his heart, so that in all the years to come many, many people would look at the artist's picture, and in its depths and beauty, they would rediscover their own lost dreams.

Re-telling of a traditional story.