St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday September 18th 2022

Theme: (Luke 16:1-13 – (The dishonest manager )

I runga i te ingoa o te papa, te tama, me te wairua tapu.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*Amen*

Today’s gospel is again one that most preachers would prefer be addressed by someone else. All of Jesus’ parables are challenging, but this is surely one of the most challenging. It is considered by most theologians or preachers tasked with its interpretation, to be one of the most difficult to understand and explain, full of apparent contradictions and unusual comments by Jesus. I agree!

It focuses on the vexed issue of money.

Money’s influence on perceived status, behaviour, and economic security, is very familiar to us. Much has been written and sung about the advantages and disadvantages of money in our lives -
*Money can’t buy me love.
Money makes the world go-around.
Money, Money Money.*

Naturally, Monty Python had its own inimitable perspective on that.

(Monty Python clip)

This parable is bracketed by Luke with two other money parables, that of the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother, and also the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which will be looked at by Maxwell next week. In each of these three parables, money is a problem: it can be used for gain, but also can lead to ruin.

 However, here, Jesus uses it to make a different point. In this parable both the key characters are wicked. The rich man and the man whose possessions he manages, are both unsavoury characters. This should alert us to the fact that Jesus is not exhorting us to emulate the behaviour of the characters but is trying to expound on a larger principle.

The manager had authority over all of the master’s resources and could transact business in his name. Now, it may not be apparent at this point in the parable (but is made more evident later on), but the master is probably not aware of the manager’s dishonesty. The manager is being fired for apparent mismanagement, not fraud. This explains why he is able to conduct a few more transactions before he is out of his job, and why he is not immediately tossed out on the street or executed.

Realizing that he will soon be without a job, he makes some shrewd deals behind his master’s back by reducing the unpaid debt owed by several of the master’s debtors, in exchange for shelter and support when he is eventually put out. However, when the master becomes aware of what the wicked manager had done, instead of being more angry over loss of his income, he commends him for knowing how to look after himself. Being ‘streetwise’.

So why does the master commend the dishonest manager for being streetwise? One possibility is that the manager has reduced his own commission in the debts owed and that this is what is being commended. Another is that the master is simply commending the manager for responding shrewdly to a difficult circumstance.

We need to be especially careful not to treat this as an example story — namely to suggest that Christians today should follow the example of the dishonest manager. We can be reasonably certain that the disciples understood that the behaviour described in this parable was not what Jesus was encouraging. Remember this is part of a trilogy of stories, told one after the other. It was a sort of ‘shock’ story, embedded between the two other parables related to wealth and its misuse.

Because Jesus goes on to encourage his disciples to be smart for the right reasons, concentrating their attention on being honest in their dealings with others. His comments are set in a wonderful group of contrasting images.

*If you’re honest in small things,*

*You’ll be honest in big things.*

*If you’re a crook in small things,*

*You’ll be a crook in big things.*

Ending with –

*You can’t serve both God and the bank.*

Jesus’ hearers would know that the debt contracts usually included exorbitant interest hidden from illiterate peasants. Today, analogies may be high-interest personal loans to people who would struggle to repay them, or harsh austerity measures imposed on countries whose citizens had no role in agreeing to a debt. An example will be how the countries who have helped Ukraine to fight this war, decide what to do about recompense after it is over.

When he reduced the payments, the manager may have been simply forgiving his own cut of the interest. Or he may have been doing what the law of God commands, namely removing all the hidden interest in the contracts. To ingratiate himself with the debtors, he had them change the amount they owed on their bills to possibly exactly the amount they borrowed, eliminating the hidden and prohibitive interest.

If the rich landlord was not a Gentile, but a Jew (the text does not say), he would know the Torah teaching against charging interest. So, the rich man, suddenly recognizing that he needed at least to appear to be observing covenantal laws, commended his steward.

Martin Luther warned about the seduction of wealth 500 years ago. He wrote “Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property, in them he trusts and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god — that is, money and possessions — on which he fixes his whole heart. It is the most common idol on earth.”

The Christian community is one where disciples share all things in common, distributing to all, as any has need. Constantly being alert to those suffering and struggling and responding in whatever way best helps them. A different way of using wealth.

The principle that Jesus is trying to convey is one of a just manager or steward rather than an unjust one. The unjust manager saw his master’s resources as a means for his own personal enjoyment and advancement. Conversely, Jesus wants His followers to be just, righteous stewards. If we understand the principle that everything we own is a gift from God, then we realise that God is the owner of everything and that we are His stewards. As such, we are to use the Master’s resources to further the Master’s goals. In this specific case, we are to be generous with our wealth and use it for the benefit of others.

If God is our Master, then our wealth will be at His disposal. God gives us resources that not only provide for our needs, but also allow us to demonstrate our faithfulness to kingdom values.

Jesus tells us to use our money and other resources in ways that will help us in eternity.

Amen