

Theme: Who are we serving?

21/9/14

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (Lk 19:10).

Readings: Luke 16. 1-15

This last week in politics has been very interesting.

Kim Dotcom arranged a high profile political meeting on Monday and brought to the stage either in person or via video links Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Glen Greenwald for a moment of truth. This was to be a great reveal, that was to shock the nation.

While it was impossible to miss news about this event, I didn't attend or follow it as it was streamed on the internet.

The reason I didn't follow it was that I thought the whole thing was self-serving rather than nation serving.

If the revelations truly were in the interest of the people of New Zealand, why were the claims not brought forward earlier, either given to the press, parliament or reported to the police so there was time for an independent, detailed investigation by a reputable body to disclose the truth.

Why did these men only come forward at the behest of Kim Dotcom and at a time and place of his choosing?

What is the real motive of aligning themselves with a multi-millionaire, who is himself of dubious reputation and under investigation for alleged criminal behaviour?

It is telling that if three of these four men were in the United States of America they would be immediately arrested.

Others may see it differently, but I see this whole event as a display of self-service.

The underlying theme in the passage we are looking at today is to ask who are you serving? Who are we serving?

This is part of our series from Luke's gospel which we have called stories with meaning.

Jesus has been telling parables – pithy stories that have a point to them.

On one level, they may just be entertaining stories, but on another level Jesus is using them to teach people about the kingdom of God.

The parable of the shrewd manager is perhaps the most difficult parable in the NT.

One of our problems with this passage is that we often read it out of context.

We generally read it as an independent story without seeing how Jesus is using this group of stories to reveal the wrong attitudes of the Pharisees and the true heart of God’s concern for the lost.

Context is set for us in Luke 14 where Jesus is having a meal in the house of a Pharisee and the Pharisees are watching him.

Jesus spoke to them in parables that were critical of the Pharisees attitudes and behaviours.

The context develops as the crowd who follow Jesus gather round to hear him. Among this crowd are people who the Pharisees despised and we hear their criticism of Jesus ... *the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.* (Lk 15:2).

Jesus responded to this by telling three parables about the lost:

The lost sheep – shepherd leaves the 99 to look for the lost one.

The lost coin – in which a woman diligently searches for a lost coin.

The lost sons – in which a wasteful son misuses his inheritance.

The Pharisees would have seen the “sinners” as the wasteful son who should be disowned.

Jesus looked at the sinners with compassion, knowing they were lost and also knowing that when they were found all heaven would celebrate.

Now Jesus' stories take another twist.

The word used to describe the prodigal son as wasteful is now applied to the shrewd manager.

We read *There was a rich man whose manager was accused of **wasting** his possessions* (Lk 16:1).

Jesus is portraying the Pharisees as the wasteful manager, wasting what God has given them.

Jesus used this story to teach a number of important ideas and it ends by revealing something else about the Pharisees, we read, ... *The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.* Luke 16:14

If you have read this story for the first time, you might be wondering what it means and asking is Jesus really commending dishonesty?

If that is you, you are not alone.

I am sure that there are people here who have read this many times and still wonder about its meaning.

I have read about eight scholarly commentaries on this. They all recognise the difficulties in this passage and while they explore some common threads, there is no clear agreement on it.

When I first looked at this series and saw this story, I thought I will get Ron to preach this one!

This story is difficult for a number of reasons:

It is often read out of context.

Things that were obvious to the initial audience are not obvious to us,

Because Jesus seems to commend dishonesty.

While most parables have one clear meaning, Jesus applies this one in several different ways.

Because it is a difficult passage to understand we need to look at it in a different way.

Normally when you try to understand one of Jesus' stories, you look first at the story and then at whatever application he makes from it.

With this story we need to do this the other way around and use his applications to help us understand his story.

I think at the heart of this message Jesus is trying to get the Pharisees to look behind their façade of holiness in which it looks like they are serving God and to recognise they are really serving themselves.

The reality of who they are serving is revealed in how they are using their resources.

What they are doing with their wealth reveals their true priorities in life.

The scholar William Barclay says this is a story about rogues.

The manager is a rogue because of the way he handles the accounts.

The debtors are rogues because they agree to fraudulently alter the accounts.

The master is a rogue, because he commends the dishonesty of the manager.

There are two key approaches to understanding the actions of the manager.

Firstly, it could be that the master was dishonestly putting a surcharge on the cost of the olive oil and wheat as a means of charging interest to those who owed him money.

Charging interest was forbidden by the law, but a way around this was to deal in commodities rather than cash and to inflate the price to add in hidden interest.

If this was the case, when the shrewd manager reduced the amounts owing he was simply removing the interest charge. Because it was illegal of the master to charge it, he could not take the manager to court. And because they hadn't been charged this large amount of interest the debtors would look

favourably on the manager and look after him when he lost his job.

The master seeing the cleverness of the situation commends the manager on his shrewdness.

In this view the manager has finally acted honesty with the accounts.

This gets Jesus off the hook because in this view he is not commending dishonesty but that the manager has for once acted honesty.

This might be a good way of looking at it, but it is not without problems since the obvious reading of story really gives the impression the manager was dishonest.

Another way of looking at it is that the manager has been adding a substantial charge to the transactions as his own fee.

The initial charge the master brings against him is of wasting his possessions.

You could imagine the manager using the company credit card for personal items, of treating customers to excessive corporate lunches and padding the accounts, taking holidays under the guise of business trips and giving gifts from which he is benefiting.

You can also imagine him putting up his percentage of the fees at the master's expense.

In this view when the manager reduces the accounts he is writing off his fee from the bill with the hope that he will benefit from it later through the gratitude of the debtors.

From the master's view his manager has been wasting his resources by using them to line his own pockets rather than to gain the best price for the master.

So the manager has been dishonest towards his master and the customers.

Only when he is about to be fired does he do another deal, still dishonestly using the masters funds in collusion with the debtors to benefit them at the masters expense.

In verse 8 Jesus calls him a dishonest manager.

Jesus' first application in verse 9 is to point out how shrewd worldly people can be in the use of their resources.

I think we have seen a similar parable worked out in the way Dotcom has used his resources to try influence the election, funding a political party and a holding a big event with star guests

Worldly people use money, power and fame to get the results they want.

This is not to say everything transaction in the world is bad, just to point out that worldly people can be very shrewd.

Jesus advises his followers to use their worldly wealth cleverly for eternal purposes.

We read, I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. (Lk 16:9).

While we should not follow the dishonesty of the shrewd manager, we should follow his example of preparing for the future and using our present wealth with eternity in mind.

Remember the initial context in Luke 14 is that Jesus is at dinner with the Pharisees where he told them a parable about a great feast and said to them,

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Lk 14:12-14

The ancient Rabbis had a saying, *The rich look after the poor in this life and the poor look after the rich in the life to come.*

Jesus' point was that caring for people who could not repay you in this life is a way of investing in heavenly riches. It provides a heavenly welcome from all those you have helped on earth.

This should not be thought of as buying your way into heaven.

This generosity is a result of your salvation, not a means of gaining salvation.

In this way people who are saved live out biblical virtues and show the character of our heavenly father.

When I am with the Lord in eternity I look forward to thanking those who gave sacrificially so that I might know Jesus.

When I was about 5 my parents sent me and my brother to Sunday school.

I feel confident there was a Sunday school teacher there who I have no memory of who must have explained the gospel to me so that I came to faith in Jesus.

In eternity I want to discover who that person was, to thank him or her, and to tell them what this gift has meant to me and how it has touched the people in churches I have ministered.

I think in eternity we will both welcome people with grateful hearts for what they invested in us, and also be welcomed by those people who we invested in.

So we should use our worldly resources wisely, shrewdly, cleverly to invest in eternity.

Reading this I was reminded, having wealth is not a sin, but it is a great responsibility and we should use it wisely.

Jesus next point is *whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.* (Lk 16:10).

We won't spend much time on this, it is quite obvious.

While we know people can be reformed and when people come to faith they do change, generally speaking what Jesus says here is obvious.

No one who lost money to dishonest financiers in the recent recession is going to reinvest with those same people.

Jesus' key teaching from this story is that a person cannot serve two masters, we cannot serve both God and Money.

The shrewd manager had the choice to serve his master or serve himself.

Both before and after his wastefulness is discovered he has chosen to serve himself not his master.

In the context of this story money does not simply mean cash.

Old translations used the word Mammon which meant wealth of every kind. It included money, but was more a selfish world view of wealth. It would include resources, skills and a mind-set that could be turned to a profit and make money.

Mammon was a world view in which wealth was God.

It may rankle with some, but God demands our all. We cannot be partly committed to God and also to something else.

It is all or nothing.

Jesus is either Lord of all or he is not Lord at all.

Christianity is not a faith of half measures; it calls us to be fully committed to God.

It is a question of the heart, the soul and the mind – are we fully his?

Like other verses this can be taken out of context and made to sound like Christians should be poor and can't in good conscience be rich.

This is a misunderstanding. Jesus' point is that we should serve God rather than riches and whatever riches we may have, however abundantly God may bless us, we have a responsibility to use our wealth according to God's kingdom values and plan.

Just look at the verses below and see the reaction of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. (Lk 16:14).

Remember this all began at dinner with the Pharisees as Jesus began to pick away at their righteous façade revealing their self-serving ways, their lack of care for the spiritually lost and now their love of money.

Doing this Jesus is revealing they are not truly serving God.

Seeing these applications we can look back and see what the story was about.

The Pharisees are not really upright people, they are more like the shrewd manager wasting the masters resources and misusing his riches to look after themselves.

They are inviting each other to feasts, but failing to feed the poor.

God had blessed them with so much, with the land, with abundance, with his word and his laws; and also by revealing his character and desire for mercy, justice and compassion.

Their devotion to wealth has replaced their devotion to God.

Their love of money is such they are failing to invest it eternally by helping the lost and the poor.

They haven't been faithful with little things, but have been found to be dishonest.

In the parable of the shrewd manager Jesus is not commending dishonesty, but showing the extent to which a slave of money will go to look after themselves.

He is inferring that a servant of God should show similar determination to look after others.

What difference does this make to us?

Who are we serving?

A key element in our desire to be a spiritually healthy church is to be a people *Serving with Compassion*

Service is a key component in our church.

As we serve God we discover his desire that we serve the poor, the lost and the outsiders.

Compassionate service links us in to the servant heart of Jesus who was willing to put others first.

It also identifies us with the compassionate heart of God who so loved the world that he gave ...

Both as a church and as individuals we want our lives to reflect the godly value of compassionate service.

This is the antidote to the shrewd manager syndrome that plagued the Pharisees.

They did not want to serve the lost and they clearly lacked compassion for the poor.

One of the things I love about the Eden-Epsom church is that God has inspired us to be a generous compassionate church – and given God’s generous blessings to us – so we should be. We are currently filling **shoeboxes** with Christmas gifts for children – a number of people have told me how they look forward to this and how they enjoy shopping for these children. Last year we filled 86 boxes with love.

My heart was gladdened when we gave cans to the food bank in memory of **Charlie** – with over 180 tins collected.

After the 10.30am service today families are meeting to help the children prepare for the **White Sunday** celebration, giving generously of time and energy to make this a great event for the children.

Our G-SET team has begun to meet to prepare for the **light party** in October – again motivated by love to serve the children of our community.

Can you imagine as we enter heaven to have:

A child welcoming you and thank you for the shoebox full of gifts they had received.

A father welcoming you because he had been able to feed his family from the cans you gave

A family welcoming you because their lives had been changed by the white Sunday service or the light party?

And Jesus saying when you did this for the least of these my children, you did it for me.

Let us then not be like the Pharisees who gave the impression of serving God, when really they were ignoring his desire to show compassion to the poor and to open the door of heaven to the lost.

Instead let us be a church and a people who serve God as we invest our wealth, ourselves our skills, our time and energy into compassionate service which reflects the heart of God's love and his desire that the lost should be found.

All this to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.