

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday (C)

18<sup>th</sup> September 2016

‘Win yourselves friends in eternity!’

Amos 8: against those who swindle the poor

Ps 112: *from the dungheap He raises the poor*

1Tim 2: *there should be prayers offered ... for kings and others in authority*

Lk 16: 1–13: *the children of this world are more astute than children of the light*

I think it’s fair to say that a first reaction to this parable of Jesus might well be: what *is* He going on about? So many of Our Lord’s parables are straightforward — simple, direct messages, with a profound, but clear, meaning. But today’s Gospel is altogether different: it’s a difficult parable about a dishonest steward who ‘batters up’ some friends before he’s dismissed from office: he gathers some support around him with relief on oil and wheat debts. What is Jesus saying to us? Why does the Master in His story seem to *praise* this dishonest steward?

Well, if you notice, the master in Jesus’s parable doesn’t actually praise the steward for his wastefulness or his dishonesty, but for his “astuteness,” his cunning and initiative as he plans for the future and saves his skin. Jesus’s point seems to be that we have all these ways of behaving, day-in, day-out, which show our enormous capacity for inventiveness and adaptation in achieving

worldly ends. We do use our cunning and our initiative, just like that steward: as human beings we have an enormous resourcefulness to get things done ... It’s just that, are the things we pour time and effort into the most important things in life? I’m sure we can think of lots of occasions when we’ve spent inordinate amounts of time on things that are not that crucial. I remember last year spending days trying to find a better deal on my car insurance. Recently, I spent hours getting a better tariff for my mobile phone. We can easily go out of our way for these *little* things. Sometimes we insist on going back to another shop because we saw something cheaper there than it is right here. There are all sorts of ways in which we are astute in the things of the world, and give them huge attention. It’s not that they’re bad things; it’s just that we are prone to giving more time to the less important things in life. If only we used an equal measure of zeal and application to our eternal life, saving our lives for eternal happiness. We spend so much time planning our lives on earth; let’s be determined to plan also for our future with God.

I think that there's also another dimension to this parable, and it has to do with 'mixed motives.' The parable reminds us of the reality of life, which is complex, and in which we can have mixed motives in much of what we do. The steward has been dishonest; but here he is 'making friends' through some generous discounts, a little bit of 'creative accountancy'! It might remind us of our own 'mixed motives' and the incentives we employ to get things done. Or sometimes we use our money. When we're first in love with someone we can often spend lavishly and perhaps foolishly — from our insecurity we try and impress our friend. And yet while money doesn't buy love, the spending itself needn't actually take away from the genuineness of that love, and that relationship may mature very happily. We might give regularly to a homelessness charity, so as to assuage our conscience about the beggars we see on London streets — maybe not a pure act of love, but, still, there's very nothing wrong with that either. Doesn't Jesus say, "use your money to win yourselves friends in eternity"! We can use money, "that tainted thing"

in all sorts of good ways, even if sometimes our heart may not be purely behind it. We need to do that good anyway!

We are complex creatures, but God knows us through and through, and encourages us even in our mixed motives, to work for good. Sometimes we may have to coerce ourselves into doing what is right. Even if in our friendship with God we feel sometimes forced by circumstances, or by tragedy, or by Church rules, yet the true goodness of God can win us over fully: He can purify our intentions, and eventually bring us to love Him freely and purely for Himself. God made us and knows us, and is aware even more than we are ourselves of our efforts to be good and holy, or our lack of effort. Above all, the Lord is merciful. Let's not get down over the mixed efforts of our Christian lives ... but let's hang in there, offering to the Lord what we do, what we can, and little by little a bit more. Let's not settle for a mediocre life of "getting and spending"; let's make sure that we are gradually "laying up treasure for eternity." Let's ask the Lord to purify our time and efforts to get us there more peacefully!