

## Trinity 9

*“his lord commended the unjust steward”* (gospel).

There are periodic outbreaks of rioting and looting in many counties including our own. It is foolish to offer mere worldly wisdom. So here are a few Christian perspectives, in starkest summary.

“Thou shalt not steal” binds us, but it may not bind those outside the Covenant.

The Christian found helping victims (or bringing perpetrators to repentance) is so far forth doing his duty to God and his neighbour.

Christians are called to respect authority as an ordinance of God, and that is still true if it is godless. We are not here to judge politicians, police or magistrates.

Christians (unless they also have worldly wisdom) do not know what is possible or desirable with regard to the secular economy or the ordering of “society”.

Our only proper response is the Gospel. There are no short cuts. There would still be problems in an entirely Christian society – but we are not there and there is no concerning point in imagining what those problems and their solutions would be.

Jesus describes a world of general cheating. The steward has cheated his master. And also God, for the original transactions were tricks to get round the Jewish law against usury, which forbids interest on loans. So the debtors had signed up to owing more than they had actually been lent. Maybe the steward in allowing them to falsify the documents is bringing the agreements back into conformity with God's law. More likely, he is just seeking to improve his prospects of further employment. For once in a while I think we are right to assume this is a parable which makes one point only. That point is not a moral one but is about decisive action in a crisis.

A parable fails, like a joke, if it has to be explained, but try this: The Kingdom of God is upon you, and you must decide now. This is not to say that Jesus does not care for moral practice. He certainly does, and at one level he continues the Baptist's mission of persuading all Israel to turn back to God. The difference is, perhaps, that for the Baptist the call is to repent now, for the time is soon; for Jesus, to repent now, for the time has come. And repentance cannot exist without the decision to take on the obligation to keep the Commandments (and indeed more) – to live hereafter the Covenant life in accordance with God's law.

We use the term “crisis” too casually. For Christians, there will only ever be one crisis, the Day of Judgement. Yet many situations are in their degree situations of crisis, that is when it becomes necessary to decide, to make choices, when to be on neither side or to “pass by on the other side” is to fail in our duty. They are symbols of that ultimate crisis, and if we are to receive a merciful judgement at the last day, we had better learn by choosing the right path in the lesser situations.

You may know that some think the concluding verses of the passage read untidily, as if they were not the words of Jesus. I do not think the case is proven. “His lord” is still part of the parable – that the steward's master himself sees the joke against himself, that his own sins of usury (how can he plead ignorance?) have been so criminally “corrected” by his cheating steward. (I do not think we should assume that the master stands for God and is therefore to be read as blameless.) Besides, there is the well crafted parallel between the earthly houses to which the steward seeks entry and the everlasting habitations to which God (the plural is a form of reverence and the “habitations” the Tent of the divine presence) will receive those who apply the parable to themselves.

But that still leaves “make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness” unexplained. I can only suggest (with St. Paul) that the pursuit of utter separation from the sinful world is impossible and a mistake. We cannot “go out of this world” (1 Corinthians 5.10) and it is a mistake to try. Rather our calling is to live rightly within it – but all the time knowing that it is going to fail. That is why the Son of Man came “eating and drinking”, and they called him “a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners” (Luke 7.34). Jesus knows the way of separation (which others, not least at Qumran, tried), and it is not the gospel. Maybe a few Christians are called to it. Most of us are not so called, and must make our best way through all the ambiguities of a world which has rejected God's rule and so finds itself without rule.

There are some who think there must be an “answer” to life, the universe and everything and so to public disorder. We say, not forty two, but “Nothing simple. Only the gospel”.