

Trinity 17 (Proper 20)
Bristol Cathedral, 2013

Amos 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

It is a delight to be here. Emma and I love Bristol – it’s a city we know quite well, and your welcome could not have been warmer – thank you. In fact we were here in the summer as well, when we came by narrow-boat, taking five days to make a journey that last evening took us about 90 minutes by road. Getting away from Salisbury is rather more complicated than arriving in Bristol in fact, not least because of the cat. The cat, who is usually a docile, loving bundle of fluff becomes a suspicious, sulky and aggressive hunter whenever she suspects we are abandoning her for something more fun, and those employed to feed her while we are away are just as fair game for her spurts of unpredictable violence as anyone else. I’ll come back to the cat in a bit.

But anyway here we are, and here I am, delighted to be invited to preach in this wonderful cathedral. Less delighted, if I am honest, to be invited to preach on one of the most tricky parables of the whole book. Your Dean preached for us last November and ten months later, by clever use of a flattering invitation, and nimble attentiveness to the calendar and lectionary, he has his revenge.

Before your Dean had the joys of this appointment he had the misfortune, in Gloucester, to line manage me and this unhappy task was his for two years. At the outset he had long, flowing, golden hair. Line management is tricky, and tiring. We find in the parable this morning an example of this. The absentee landlord of some property – some significant and capacious

property in all likelihood, calls his manager, the chap who oversees the day to day running of this business, before him and says what all line managers have to say from time to time: “what is this that I hear about you?” Justify your actions, or it is P45 time.

And we then hear his internal monologue as he considers his options. He is likely to be dismissed from his job. The other employment options are scarce – there’s manual labour, for which he’s not strong enough, and there’s begging, for which he is too proud. So like the Baldrick of the New Testament, he comes up with a cunning plan. But unlike Baldrick, this one might actually work. He calls in his master’s debtors, and he reduces their debts, so that they will think well of him, perhaps even so that they will owe him. He’s making friends, investing in these tenants now, so that if and when he is dismissed by his master, they will feel obligated to offer him welcome. This he does, and his master, discovering this, commends him for his shrewdness. Interestingly the parable doesn’t reveal whether the manager’s actions were illegal or just cunning, and we also don’t discover whether he gets commended and still dismissed, or whether by this act of cunning he saves his job.

Now there are all sorts of challenges in this story, and theologians, clever people with red hoods and caffeine addictions, have offered all sorts of interpretations of what is going on, and quite what our Lord can mean when he says, at the end of this, “make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth.”

What I think we can be clear about is that this is a parable about behaviour, and about engagement. Which is not surprising given where this parable is sited in Luke’s Gospel. It follows the parable of the prodigal son, and that of the lost sheep and lost coin, both before it, and it is followed by the parable of the rich man (Dives) and Lazarus. Those parables, too, are about

relationship, money, and the nature of the interaction between things temporal and things eternal. How is the life of the faithful person negotiated in the world, and oriented towards heaven? And money is a ready example – not the only example but a good one - of the way in which the material and the spiritual can bash up against each other. Today's Gospel and the parable which follows it both begin with the words, "there was a rich man." The prodigal son is at least mostly about money as well.

We are caused to consider this morning, as were the disciples, and the ever present group of Pharisees, that there is something about the way in which we comport ourselves in this world, something about our behaviour, about the way we interact with the world and engage with it, which is formational of, and demonstrative of our character, which reveals Christian nature, which tells of how deeply our baptism has bitten into our heart and our soul.

This is a gritty, earthy parable. It's not a very nice one. It's not one I use a lot in school assemblies, and I don't suppose it features on your top ten favourites list either. And that's probably partly the point as well. This manager is in a fix. He's hemmed in by circumstance and personal decision making. He's got himself in a jam. Just like you do. Just like I do. And he is accountable, just like me and you. He belongs to society. There are people around him and there are bonds and ties of dependence and oversight and authority and responsibility. He line manages, and he is line managed. There is a whole world of expectation and pressure put upon him – as we experience also.

And at least one of the things that this parable is asking the reader, the hearer, to consider is this – are you going to engage with the world? Are you going to consider your surroundings, your situation, your companions on the way, and engage? Of

the many popular misconceptions about Christianity one of the most popular is that here is a faith into which we can escape. Where we can leave our brain at the door, and sink into the frothy pink comfortable fluff of a life resigned and abandoned to bob along on the waves of God's love and Stanford in C.

And it's just not like that. The steward is commended, I'd like to suggest, not so much because of his specific actions, which are cunning at best and illegal at worst, but because he reacted at all. Because he made a decision. Because he negotiates himself through this collection of challenges and circumstance. Action is required of those who are badged with the cross and sealed with the Spirit.

The steward's actions are the result of his finding himself in a situation which requires an urgency of response. This is no less than the situation the Church finds herself in, and the individual Christian too. Consider the words spoken to the candidate after baptism. "Shine as a light in the world". "Fight valiantly against sin the world and the devil." There is an urgency about this, which is shot through the whole of the New Testament in fact. The author of the first letter to Timothy "urges" his readers to pray for their leaders, because salvation is dawning. He describes his ministry as of a herald, someone who is to call, to proclaim and to warn. Elsewhere in Scripture St Paul urges, "now is the time to receive God's mercy – today is the day to be saved."

And then there's something about the way in which this commitment to engaging in even the little things builds character. "Whoever is faithful in a very little", says Christ, "is faithful also in much." Each baptised Christian is entrusted with and required to guard that "holy fire" which ought continually to be fanned and stirred up within us, because that is the task of the disciple. The choir will sing John Hilton's motet "Lord for thy tender mercy's sake" later in this service, which is a prayer

for exactly these types of gifts of the Holy Spirit which make for the development of Christian character. “Lord, for thy tender mercy’s sake lay not our sins to our charge, but forgive that is past and give us grace to amend our sinful lives, to decline from sin and align to virtue.”

That’s a pretty good starting point, and a fine prayer to equip us with some words as we approach the altar this morning, to receive under the form of bread and wine gifts which can raise us up and make us new again. Shrewdness, agility, the ability and willingness to engage, and almost always in the small things first. I promised we’d come back to my grumpy cat, so here are words of one American New Testament scholar:

“Most of us this week will not christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with a queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a local councillor, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbour’s cat. Whoever is faithful in a very little, is faithful also in much.”

Amen.