

biblical resources

Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!



Sunday 22 September (25C13) *Who ever is faithful in a very little...*

Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 112; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

You cannot serve both God and wealth

Luke 16:1 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' 3 Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7 Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' 8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is

gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Luke 16:10 "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."



Initial Observations

The parable and the following sayings bristle with questions and good deal of ink has been spilt explaining this text. What's it about? The right use of material goods? How to face the parousia? Is the "Lord" really Jesus? Does it praise dishonesty? What's the mammon of injustice? Proclaimed properly, it should certainly puzzle those who hear it today.

Old Testament Background

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of

Canaan, to be your God. (Leviticus 25:35-38)

What kind of writing is this?

The parable is really a kind of parabolic narrative, followed by sayings. It is found only in Luke, but may go back to Jesus because the social context is rural whereas early Christianity was urban. It is probable that the parable proper went from v.1 to v.8a.

With 8b, a series of later commentaries begins. V. 8b reflects early Christian language; v. 9 can best be interpreted as a prophetic comment on sharing of goods. The appended sayings in vv. 10-13 are linked by vocabulary, although a bit in tension with the parable (the steward has been dishonest in much!).

Vv. 10-13 are proverbial in style, reflection Israel's wisdom tradition.

New Testament Foreground

Luke is interested in money and there two associated texts in the Gospel: 12:42-48 (below) and the rich man and Lazarus in 16:19-31.

And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an

hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (Luke 12:42–48)

St Paul

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (2Corinthians 9:6)

But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. (1Thessalonians 2:4)

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:10)

Brief Commentary

Verse 1 The parable is directed to the disciples only. The context is quickly narrated. It is never claimed that the charge is unjust. Manager is found only in Luke in the Gospels (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8).

Verse 2 The judgment is swift and the manager must himself act swiftly. He is about to lose income, home and honour.

Verse 3 Interior dialogue is typical of the Lucan special material. The manager quickly and realistically considers his options.

Verse 4 The goal is to still have somewhere to live and to retain his social status.

Verses 5-7 The amount is considerable: about 450 litres or 500 or 600 workdays. Is the manager continuing to act unjustly? Probably not. Agents in those days had considerable latitude and, most likely, we are to imagine him reducing *his* "cut" and so gaining favour with the debtors.

Verse 8a The master is not

commending further dishonesty but rather the shrewdness of his employee. At this level, the parable is typically Lucan: a disreputable figure is held up as a disconcerting example (cf. Zacchaeus, the prodigal son, the good thief, all special to Luke). The point is clear: act now so that your future will be assured.

Verse 8b The language is now that of early Christianity (cf. 1 Thess 5:5-6). It is an implied judgment: at least the children of this world *act*.

Verse 9 The opening words are very solemn: And I say to you. Very likely we are hearing hear not the historical Jesus but an early Christian prophet. It does build on the parable—the manager did make friends for himself—but the end is eschatological. In the Lucan worldview, the friends are fellow Christians, who share their goods. The lectionary translation (JB) fails here: money is not just tainted but is the "mammon of injustice." The prophetic assessment is clear. It is, however, that money is bad in itself but rather that in the Kingdom there are no personal possessions. The Jerusalem Bible gets it right to the "tents of eternity." There is an OT background (cf. Ex 25-27), but the meaning is metaphorical in the context: to be welcomed home at the Parousia. The next few verses are added to preclude any misunderstanding of the message as praise for dishonesty. The full context for extra teachings runs from v. 10 to v. 18. The parable in vv. 19-31 the closes this section with a frame (*inclusio*).

Verse 10 "A very little" is the superlative in Greek: the least. Faithful in a secular sense means reliable. The step to religious fidelity is easily made by the reader.

Verses 11-12 It is likely that Luke has made a duplicate in the second personal singular, in the negative and in the form of a rhetorical question so as to make a link with the preceding parable. The language here as a somewhat philosophical feel to it, with the generalisations such as "one who is faithful" etc. This works as a Hellenistic counterweight to the more semitic and even mythological mammon (present in the Greek). The rather open "who" can be taken to be God.

Verse 13 This *logion* or teaching is found elsewhere. Compare:

"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Matthew 6:24)

Jesus said, "A person cannot mount two horses or bend two bows. And a slave cannot serve two masters, otherwise that slave will honor the one and offend the other." (GThom 47a)

Luke has added the word for a domestic servant (repeated the NRSV to sustain inclusive language). It *was* possible for someone at the time to have two masters, with predictable consequences. In Aramaic and Hebrew to love can mean to prefer. For the final sentence, see the citations from Paul above. The key expression is "to serve" and has to do with the integrity of the person as a whole.

Pointers for Prayer

1. As often with the parables of Jesus, this one is intended to shock in order to make us think. Jesus is not praising the injustice of the servant, but his purposefulness in preparing for the future. In your experience what difference does it make when you are purposeful and energetic instead of lethargic?
2. It was his master's call to account that galvanised the servant into action. What have been the experiences, or people, that have galvanised you into action when you had been somewhat halfhearted in your efforts?
3. Who have been the people whose energy, drive and astuteness have been an inspiration to you in how to handle difficult situations?
4. "No servant can be the slave of two masters". When have you experienced the truth of this statement?

Prayer

God our saviour, you call us into your service. Make us wise and resourceful: children of the light who continue your work in this world with untiring concern for integrity and just. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Spare me the din of your chanting, let me hear none of your strumming on lyres!

- Amos 8:4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
5 saying, "When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
6 buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."
7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Initial Observations

The burning desire for justice is characteristic of the eighth century BC prophets and Amos is a very fine example. His target is the horrible combination of religious hypocrisy and avarice. For once, a reading requires practically no comment.

Where does the reading come from?

Amos is the first writing prophet to come down to us. His passion for social justice leads to thrilling invective against oppression of the poor.

A complex tradition lies behind the book as we now have it. In any case, here is the outline:

1:1-2 Context of ministry

1:3-2:16 Oracle against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah, and finally Israel

3:1-6:14 Invectives against specific groups of people.

7-9 Vision reports: locusts, fire, plumb line, summer fruit and YHWH at the altar.

8:4-14; 9:7-10 Oracles

9:11-15 Restoration of the house of David.

Our reading comes from the extra oracle in 8:4-18.

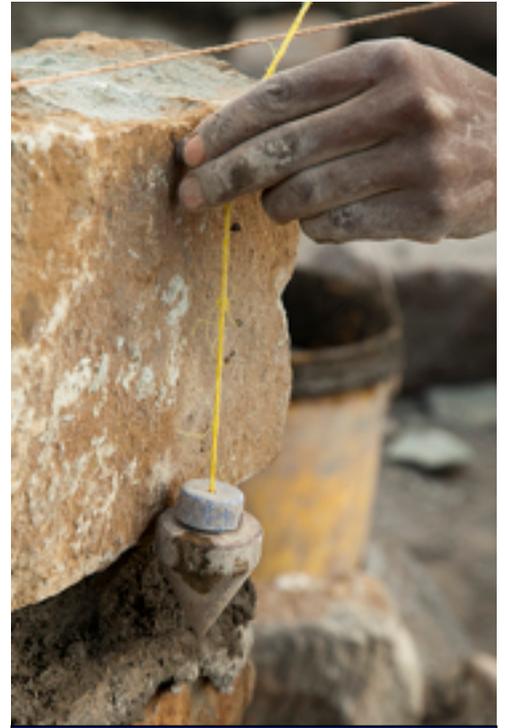
What kind of writing is this?

This is a judgment oracle, showing the using marks of biblical poetry. Parallelism can be seen in vv. 4, 5ab and 6ab. These illustrate the "uneasy synonymity" (R. Alter) of biblical poetry, once you notice that the repeat line is usually more intense or concrete or "causal." V. 7 is a bridge verse taking the reader to the varieties of punishment which make up the rest of chapter 8.

Old Testament Background

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!" The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says the LORD. (Amos 4:1-3)

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts! Cross over



This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by." (Amos 7:7-8)

to Calneh, and see; from there go to Hamath the great; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is your territory greater than their territory, O you that put far away the evil day, and bring near a reign of violence?

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. (Amos 6:1-7)

How does the Responsorial Psalm relate to this reading?

Psalm 113 (112) goes well with the reading from Amos because it shows God's special concern for the poor. In God's eyes, there are no distinctions and he sets the poor in

the company of the princes. Cf. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe (Deut. 10:17) Now, let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the LORD our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes." (2 Chron. 19:7)

How does the first reading prepare for the Gospel?

With its strong emphasis on social justice, the reading from Amos makes a good introduction to *some* of the Gospel. However, there is much more to the Gospel than how to handle money, as we saw above.

Brief Commentary

Verse 4 Notice the intensification from trample to bring ruin and from the needy to the poor of the land. In biblical tradition, the poor belong in a special way to the Lord (Pss 14:6; 140:12; 1 Sam 2:8; Isa 61).

Verse 5 Two economic tiers operated in the eighth century BC (see the rather blunt 4:1-3 and 6:1-7 above). The combination of apparent religious observance and real injustice is plain. The New Moon festival is enjoyed in Num 10:10; 28:11. It was a covenant holiday. The Law forbade buying and selling on the Sabbath (Exod 20:8; 23:12; 34:21; Deut 5:12-15; cf. Neh 13:15-22). The rich can hardly wait to defraud the poor by tinkering with the scales and measures. This is widely condemned (and therefore widely practiced): Lev 19:35-36; Deut 25:13-15; Mic 6:10; Ezek 45:9-12; Prov 11:1; 16:11; 20:23; Job 31:6.

Verse 6 Selling the poor for slavery was explicitly forbidden. The sweepings were contaminated grains from the bins and wagons.

Verse 7 This is an oath committing God to action—in any case, YHWH is a determined protector of the poor (Ps 82; Isa 11:4; Deut 24:14-15). God's swears earlier in this book: The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness (Amos 4:2); The Lord GOD has sworn by himself (Amos 6:8). What does it mean to swear by Jacob's pride? It means God swears by his most precious possession, Israel.

Pointers for Prayer

1. The contrast between ideals and reality, principles and practice, is something we all experience...and yet the inner voice calls us to great integrity.
2. We know that much of what we buy today is made in working conditions which would be illegal in our societies...a great awareness should lead to some decisions.

Prayer

O God, you call us to live lives of integrity and justice. May we respond to your call with all our mind, with all our heart and with all our strength. Show us how to protect the exploited and to come to the help of all in need.

Sunday Introductions

First Reading

Amos 8:4-7

Our short reading today should ring bells. It was written at a time of artificially rapid economic expansion, when a few became rich and the poor were exploited. People even "adjusted" the weights and measures to cheat at the market.

Second Reading

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Why should we pray for everyone? Because God wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth.

Gospel

Luke 16:1-15

The parable of the crafty steward was as disturbing in the first century as it ought to be today! It may help to remember that original parable may have ended with the praise of the steward (v.8a). The other sayings are really later reflections on roughly the same theme, in light of early Christian experience.

Weekday Introductions

In the course of the week, the readings reflect the time *after* the Exiles, using Ezra and Nehemiah (originally one book), as well as Haggai and Zechariah. It fills in

some of the story of that important period of reconstruction, not without lessons for our time as church. Even though Haggai and Zechariah were active *before* Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra is read first because it gives the historical context.

Monday 23 September *St Padre Pio* *Ezra 1:1-6*

Ezra (and Nehemiah) worked at the time of the return from the Exile in Babylon. The book opens with the permission to return, granted by the Persian king, Cyrus the Great.

Tuesday 24 September

Ezra 6:7-8,12,14-20

The rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem was a huge event for the Israelites. It allowed worship to take place again. The prophet Haggai was involved and from Thursday onwards we read from his book.

Wednesday 25 Sept *St Finbarr* *Ezra 9:5-9*

The context for the prayer in this reading helps. After the return from Exile, there was a risk of intermarriage and Ezra was very much against that, thinking it would bring another national disaster. Hence he does penance and offers prayer.

Thursday 26 September

Sts Cosmas and Damian, martyrs
Haggai 1:1-8

The prophet Haggai was active just after the return from the great Exile. The reading gives a very exact date, the year 520. Haggai preaches the rebuilding of the Temple, because the prosperity of the nation depends on it.

Friday 27 Sept *St Vincent de Paul* *Haggai 1:15-2:9*

Our reading is a kind of divine proclamation for the rebuilding of the Temple. Reconstruction after catastrophe—the task of the Israelites—is also our task today.

Saturday 28 Sept *St Wenceslaus* *Zechariah 2:5-9,14-15*

Zechariah wrote roughly the same time as Haggai and faced the same problem of reconstruction. Using engineering language, the prophet assures the inhabitants that God will be the "measure" of the city.