

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 22/9/2019

Jeremiah 8:11-9:1
Psalm 79:1-9
1 Timothy 2:1-10
Luke 16:1-13

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

There is a very real sense that **every** time Jesus tells us a parable we should be left scratching our heads - because in essence, parables are not meant to be understood; not really. They are a literary device designed to shock, unsettle, and disturb. Of course, we usually can't help ourselves - we are so intent on putting things together and making sense of them, that we proudly assume who is who in the parable and conclude that Jesus had this idea in his mind when he told this particular parable. And sometimes, I'm sure, we have it sort of right. Although I'm not so sure we always get the full picture.

But then we get parables like the one this morning - the parable of the unjust steward, or the shrewd manager. And I imagine Jesus rubbing his hands together thinking - "ok then, let's see them make sense of *this* one!!"

I hope in some ways this morning that I don't make sense of it for you - at least not completely - so that perhaps I leave space for the Spirit to continue the work of unpacking for you, in your particular context and setting. But this parable was included in the Gospel for a reason, and clearly, we are meant to take something out of this - so what might we find to consider...

In a strange sort of way, it does make sense. And it is helpful, I think, to consider it in light of the other passages we receive this morning. Perhaps leaving aside Paul's letter to Timothy, which seems to me to be a personal plea for holiness more than anything else, both the Psalm and the reading from Jeremiah actually inform something of what we discover in the Gospel.

In order to understand the link I am trying to make, it is necessary to understand more fully exactly what was the role of the manager in the story that Jesus told. This manager would have been, to all intents and purposes, the right hand of the rich man described in the story.

The point of the rich man appointing a manager was so that he himself did not need to worry about the day-to-day affairs of his household and his business. So when the manager acted (either well, or badly), this reflected directly on the reputation of the rich man. What we have here, then, is more than just a rich man worried about the loss of some of his wealth - in fact it seems he is more concerned with the loss of face that the manager has brought upon him.

And this makes sense - the loss of reputation is actually harder to restore and recover than the loss of some wealth, which might be boosted again with some good deals, or a bumper harvest. But people's memories are longer than that. And that does go some way to explaining the reaction of the rich man to how the manager deals with the debts. For a reduction in the debts that are owed will leave a much more positive impact upon the debtors. And so the manager has gone some way towards restoring his master's reputation (as well as to shore up some favour towards himself).

What we hear in the psalm is a similar sentiment. When the people of God suffer, when the world laughs with scorn and says (as we hear this morning), "Those people do not have God's favor! God has forgotten them!" then God's reputation for faithfulness & deliverance is undermined.

The psalmist, along with the plea to God that "we have become a mockery and a laughing stock" (Ps.79:4), implores God to show God's strength and might to the other nations, who do not believe. It is as if the people need God to be present, so they are not seen to be worshipping and following an idle God, or a God who does not care.

And the Prophet Jeremiah, likewise, cries out “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.” God’s reputation is thoroughly depleted when the poor themselves lament, “Is the LORD not in Zion? God has left us!” God’s sadness is not only the result of the people’s devastation but (arguably) moreso the result of their doubt.

God’s reputation as one who gives life, as one who leads people to lands of milk and honey, as one who is redemption and protection – it’s all pointless if the people, in their hurt and fear, turn away from God.

When the doubt of the faithful or the deeds of a manager or the suffering of a people call into question God’s reputation, then God – for God’s own sake – is motivated to restore that reputation.

The irony in this is of course that we know, in our hearts, that God does not turn aside; that God is not faithless. Indeed, as we hear Jeremiah’s words we begin to see them as not only the people’s anguish over the apparent lack of God’s presence, but are now understood as words depicting Yahweh’s anguish over the sin of the people, Yahweh’s pain over the faithlessness of that one family whose distinction from all other families is their tradition of faith.

And so, for the sake of restored reputation, God raises up the poor to sit next to princes and gives women who have been scorned a home, all in order to hear us say: “Praise the LORD!”

For the sake of restored reputation, God goes searching: “Is there no balm in Gilead?!”

For the sake of restored reputation, God fires the manager and the steward and any intermediary until such time as they/we prove to God our shrewd willingness to prioritize God’s reputation over our own (demonstrating grace instead of fighting to be right, for example, such as cutting a debt to 50 that we know should be 100).

God's reputation is wrapped up in this world, vulnerable to it – every time there is suffering, every time we who claim God's name harm one another, every time our praise is directed elsewhere besides God.

For we cannot bless God's reputation if we are serving our own.

The people in today's texts seem to be suffering from one primary problem - they have doubted God's care and involvement in, and concern for the creation and the created order, and for humanity. Their actions have not proclaimed to others - "God is here - and God's Kingdom comes".

As we reflect upon this odd parable, let us think of the ways in which we may have acted in the same way as the dishonest master - not necessarily in cheating someone else out of what was rightfully theirs, but by the subtle ways in which we might exclude; or the assumptions we make about other people or situations; or in the ways we have not given all of ourselves to a rightful cause or a time when we, by our actions, might have brought God's balm and love and mercy to bear.

If we truly believe in this God of grace and mercy, then let us by our words, our deeds, and our actions, be bearers of this hope to a world which is so much in need of it - that may be a part of the future; when God's kingdom shall come in all of its fullness...

In the name of God. Amen.