



## Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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**Date: 19 September 2010**

**Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald**

**Reading: Luke 16:1-8**

### **Background of the reading**

I found the key of interpretation of this difficult passage in its wider Jewish context of the first century Mediterranean world. Let me explain:

In the immediate context of Jesus, He and the rest were all Jews meaning that they all shared a common culture, value system and religious law. In their world everyone owned the same as everyone else. They all shared in the “limited goods” that were available to them all. Everyone was supposed to have the same amount of land and goods. If you had more, it meant only one thing! You had either inherited or you had stolen it. Rich landowners were despised for the fact that they “stole” the properties of poor landowners. No one expected any good of them. In Galilee absentee landlords were common phenomena.

It was also not allowed for any Jew to ask any interest on debts from a fellow Jew. As a matter of fact every seventh year they had to write off any debt. But as always there were ways of charging interest like adding on the interest on the final sum of debt in the form of goods. So let’s say someone owned 80 bags of wheat they could add 25% of interest making the total figure of debt to 100 bags of wheat.

In our reading the culturally despised landowner wants to fire his steward for “squandering his possessions”. The Greek word for steward *oikonomos*, can mean a house-distributor or manager, or overseer, a fiscal agent (treasurer), chamberlain, or governor. The steward had general charge of the business of the house, and was also responsible for the care of the heir. The honourable

position of the steward is seen in the fact that he was considered to be ruler over the household. Many well-to-do landowners had managers to oversee their estates; these managers, or stewards, could be slaves or, as here, free persons. Squandering another's possessions was considered a particularly despicable crime. It meant that he did not act as a proper steward taking good care of his masters household.

So the master orders him to give an account of his management which off course meant "debt management/debt consolidation". So the manager/steward who has all our sympathy as the poor victim who could not even defend himself against the accusations of his master, acts just as shrewdly or did he?

To be honest: I wonder about the intensions of this man. One scenario would be that he acted "justly" by not adding any interest but what they really owed. Through this act he could have gained three things namely:

- The respect of the debtors which could help in future;
- The silence of his master because if he complained his own injustice would become apparent;
- His integrity for following the law and not charging the interest.

But if he really was innocent of any money squandering, if he really took good care of his masters affairs, why would he ask each of the debtors what they owed? He must have known the exact figures if he really was in charge or he was playing a game. If he was innocent and renowned as an honourable man, he would have been not worried about finding another job. In that society it was all about honour and shame. If you were regarded as honourable, people would have respect for you!

I think the steward was indeed a worldly man who acted according to the worldly laws. In the beginning we almost feel sorry for him but then when he starts speaking we get a glimpse of his personality. He does not want to do hard labour. He only thinks of himself. Then he plays a card that must have been quite a blow to the landowner – which the manager would dare to expose his dealings with the debtors?

It is no wonder the land owner praised him. He had no other option otherwise his unjust dealings with his debtors would come to light. Therefore he says: "you acted wisely..." Although we expected him to be angry, he was quite calm, revealing the slyness of his character, saying that the steward acted just

as he would have acted! Both of them were guilty of acting unjustly although our initial sympathy was with the poor manager!

**Amen**

## **Sermon**

*Text verse: <sup>8</sup> And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light”.*

What does it mean?

I guess Jesus was saying that there are different values namely that of the world and that of being a follower of him.

Jesus was actually saying that “children of the light” must be different and do things differently. In this parable it is all about acquiring wealth and riches from other people. It is an example of “good first century business practice”. But it is not supposed to be the general practice of the children of the light!

The children of the light must never be under any suspicion of unjust and immoral behaviour, even today amidst our “good business practice” of acquiring wealth and material things. And I think that often we too act more like business people than people of the light.

Sometimes we would easily compromise our Christian values to the pressures of friends and other worldly commitments especially in the society that we live in. If there was one thing that struck me about the Pope was his hands-on evaluation of what is currently happening in our society. He urged Britain “to maintain its respect for religious traditions and warned against “aggressive forms of secularism” in his first speech. “Today, the United Kingdom strives to be a modern and multicultural society,” “In this challenging enterprise, may it always maintain its respect for those traditional values and cultural expressions that more aggressive forms of secularism no longer value or even tolerate.”

What is secularism? The British writer George Holyoake coined the term in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He defined secularism in his 1896 publication *English Secularism*

as: "Secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable. Its essential principles are three: (1) The improvement of this life by material means. (2) That science is the available Providence of man. (3) That it is good to do good. Whether there be other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good"

I think the Pope was telling us all what we experience almost on a daily basis. Let us revisit the three principles of secularism:

(1) The improvement of this life by material means.

It is shocking to hear how many people today think that wealth and material things can make them happy. It is almost as if people think money can buy them peace, love and hope, or a future in the case of the steward in our reading. It is everywhere visible - In all our advertisements, newspapers, offices, schools, and even in our churches. Actually everything we have belongs to God and only He can give us real hope, happiness and peace!

(2) That science is the available Providence of man.

It may sound as a good replacement but in fact it is not. God is guiding everything on this earth. He controls everything with love - something that we "cannot" say of the human race. Science can help us to understand the complexities of life but not dictating to us how to live in a meaningful relationship with God. I remembered once that a prominent brain surgeon said: He "cannot" understand why someone died after he did everything scientifically medically possible"! I guess this is where God *alone* has a say.

(3) That it is good to do good. Whether there be other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good"

It seems as if our world offers people a world that is self-efficient and all that everyone would need. This world is the ultimate destiny. It is no wonder that people today seem to be without any hope and love. Love is only a way to achieve something good. No God is love. God urges us to act in love as He did – forgivingly! No one is good except God. We are corrupt sinners who cannot act without the help and guidance of God. It is only God who can help us to do good to others not as moral goal to achieve good human relations but because we are children of the light!

May we never ever compromise the fact that in life and death we belong to God and with his help we do not need the world to tell us otherwise!

**Amen**