

## **On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand**

Reading: Luke 16: 1 -13

Open the eyes of our hearts Lord – we want to see you – to see you high and lifted up.

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Well I wonder what you made of the parable we've just had read to us. It's a rather quirky one isn't it? And it's interesting as of all the stories that Jesus told during his earthly ministry this one is often thought of as the most perplexing. And it is – it's not easy to get your head around it. The plot line however, is quite simple. Basically it's a story of a man facing a crisis in his personal life and the way he responds to it to make a new life for himself.

And it was a story originally told in the context of a generation Jesus saw sleepwalking into an existential crisis in their national life. But what I want to focus on now is what it might have to say to us today.

But before we get into the story I'd like to start by looking at the final verse in our reading. And it says this:

“No servant can serve two masters. - 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 both God and money.”

And so Jesus is here talking about money. – You cannot serve both God and money he says. But it seems to me that the point he is making is not just about money it's much more than that; it's about our priorities and the things that really matter as far as the Kingdom of God is concerned.

And in our reading Jesus is inviting us to address the issue of priorities. And what he's doing here is highlighting two opposing world views not only in this verse but also in the contrast he makes in the story between the people of light and the people of this world.

And so the first of these two views is the traditional and very Christian one which sees God acting at the very centre of our lives - a loving God who reveals himself to us in Christ and invites us to put our trust in him as the source of our security. 'On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand' as the hymn writer puts it.

And the second view is a very secular one and puts money and wealth at the centre of who we are. The pursuit of wealth is seen as the pathway to security, stability and fulfilment. And it's a view in which we find our identity in the things that belong to us and in our perceived status. And it's very much the prevailing view in our modern consumer society where many people have very little time for God or at best hold him at a distance.

And the lifestyles which these two views represent are incompatible says Jesus. You cannot serve both God and money; it's not one of those things that we can be ambivalent about. It's not that there is anything wrong with money in itself although it can be quite addictive. The more we have the more we want. And we obviously need it to live. But the problem arises when the pursuit of material things and status become the dominating factors in our lives - and when that happens it's not long before God gets squeezed out.

'No servant can serve two masters' says Jesus. And it's a verse that speaks of loyal and dedicated service. And it's interesting as this identical verse also appears in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. And it's a verse that also has a personal resonance for me as it always takes me back to a time in the 1960's when I was facing my own personal crisis - a time when I felt God was very much challenging me through this particular verse. It wasn't

because of issues with money as I was a student at the time and didn't have any. I really didn't.

But many years before as a very young boy in Sunday school I'd asked Jesus to come into my life; but it was though he was now asking me to reaffirm that decision – but with the emphasis of making Him Lord of my life as well. I was also going through a very difficult time in other ways too as and it was as though I had come to a crisis point where I had to make a choice. And there was something of an internal struggle going on. But eventually I gave in and one night knelt down and said something along the lines of: "Lord Jesus I want you to be the Lord of my life." And that decision, in fact, was one which determined the future direction of my life – the solid rock on which I could now stand and the sound foundation on which I could build

And so let's now look at the parable. And it's a story in which the main character is a rather dodgy manager who obviously has a very worldly outlook on life. And he's employed to look after the financial affairs of a rich man, probably an absentee estate owner. And this was not an unusual sort of arrangement in the Middle East at that time.

However, it's not long before rumours reach the estate owner that his manager has been mismanaging his interests and squandering his assets. It doesn't say precisely how. Anyway he's called in to give an account of himself. "What is this I hear about you?" The estate owner asks. "Well I'm going to arrange an audit of the accounts and if what I'm hearing is true, then that's it! You'll be out on your neck."

The manager groans and realises that he's in big trouble. "Well what am I going to do now this is the only job I'm qualified for? I've never done anything else." He appreciates he has very little time but knows he needs to do something, and to do it quickly to avoid disaster. And he then has this flash of inspiration. "I know what I'll do so that people will welcome me into their homes when my notice expires." And being the wheeler dealer that he is, he concocts this outrageous plan to ingratiate himself with his employer's debtors. And so he calls each one of them in and discounts their debts by significant amounts with a view to making them feel obligated to offer him care and hospitality or hopefully maybe even a job when he's out of this one.

And this is where the story gets interesting as what follows seems quite shocking, as when the estate owner goes through the accounts and discovers what the manager has been doing he doesn't react in the way you'd expect – in fact, quite the opposite. Instead of exploding in outrage as you'd expect he expresses admiration for the dishonest rascal's shrewdness in the way he prepares for his future.

And then, of course, the usual question arises at this point 'Is Jesus really commending the man for his dishonesty?' The answer is no! He's not, of course not – although I suspect Jesus is being deliberately provocative at this point in the way he uses the story to highlight that word 'shrewd.'

"For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with the world around them than are the people of the light" he says. In other words those whose outlook is conditioned by the financial markets are probably more shrewd and streetwise than we often tend to be as disciples of Jesus on our spiritual journeys. We can be a bit naïve at times.

And so what we see here is Jesus drawing that contrast between the two world views I mentioned earlier.

And that word 'shrewd' is interesting as it can have both positive and negative connotations.

And I suppose today instead of saying 'shrewd' we might say something like 'smart' such as that guy was pretty smart in the way he handled that situation. And what I see Jesus saying here is there's a worldly way of being smart or shrewd but there's also an honest and right way of being shrewd. And as followers of Jesus we need to be smart also - but in a way that's right and brings honour to him as we seek to promote the values of his Kingdom.

As Jesus then goes on to say:

"I tell you use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

And what I see Jesus saying here is "Look, people are important, and friendships are important and people are more important than things." And we should be ready to invest in people not just with money but with our time and support and in prayer to enable them to grow and flourish in the Kingdom of God.

And whatever that phrase 'eternal dwellings' means I have this picture in my mind of on one future day, in God's new creation at the end of the age, there will be those who come up to us and say: "You don't know me but I want to say thank you; because you were one of those praying for me when I was going through a very difficult time in my life." And another might say "thank you because it's through what you did for me back in 2022 that I heard the Gospel." And yet another might say "thank you for spending all that time with me when I was ill, it meant so much to me." Maybe, this might be what Jesus is getting at when he talks about being welcomed into eternal dwellings.

And as I was preparing for today I came across this story which seemed to catch something of what Jesus is saying here. And I felt it was worth sharing

And so let me tell you about a man called John Laing. Sir John Laing as he became was someone who worked in the construction industry. And when he died in 1978 his company was one of the largest in the country. In fact, it was his company that built the M1 motorway and the Sizewell nuclear power station amongst many other major projects.

But what is special about Sir John is that he was a passionate follower of Jesus. And when he was in his twenties he made a vow that as his personal income increased his standard of living would stay the same and it would be his personal giving that would increase.

And he was as good as his word as he, in effect, bank-rolled what was then known as the Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, a charity working to make Jesus known in Universities. In addition to this he generously gave for the building of churches, theological colleges and other charitable projects.

And apparently he would drop into the Fellowship offices each week always asking the same question which was very important to him. "How many students have become Christians this week?"

Well when Sir John died in 1978 his company was worth many millions of pounds but his own personal estate was worth very little, only a few hundred pounds.

And I'm sure there are many today who were students back then, who have probably never even heard of Sir John but will one day in glory be able to say to thank you. It's because of your generosity I came to know Jesus.

And then one final thought. There is a sense that we are all like the Manager in the parable. We all miss the mark in the presence of a Holy God. We have all messed up our accounts.

And as the Apostle Paul says in his New Testament letter to the Romans. ‘We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’ But then that’s where the good news of the Gospel comes in, as in Jesus everything changes – he’s the solid rock on which we can stand. When we come to him in repentance and faith we can come knowing that in him we can find we are loved and accepted and forgiven. And it’s in him we can find our true identity - as a child of the living God. Amen

Philip Newell (Reader)

Sermon preached at St Laurence’s, Scalby at a service of ‘Morning Worship’ on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

