

Luke 12:42-48

When I left school I worked with my parents running a fish and chip shop in Ambleside. My eldest sister was there too for a while and from time to time we were left in charge.

It was while our parents were away that a single day's takings topped £1,000 for the first time. (It was a long time ago when £1,000 was a considerable achievement).

I lived in the cottage next door to the shop, so I had the job of being up early to move the fish from the entrance to the fridges before the sun came round and warmed the boxes up!

I think this qualifies us among the good stewards from today's parable. We had a staff to look after and my sister did their wages each week. We had suppliers to deal with and I did all of that.

I can re-assure you we didn't beat the staff, we didn't squander the profits, there wasn't any drunkenness and should our folks have come home from holiday early they would have found us doing the job as expected.

Today's parable has a fairly clear message and one each of us can probably connect too. Chances are many of us have held positions of responsibility for other staff, or have been employed with varying attitudes towards those in management over us.

You know just how much of a drag your work can become when you have a poor manager.

What is surprising from today's parable is the extreme violence for the bad steward and the business of being beaten with blows.

Of course if you have a REALLY terrible manager you might like the idea of them being cut to pieces and assigned a place with the hypocrites.

We need to recall that Jesus frequently employed exaggeration, hyperbole, to make his point stick and make it memorable.

The Christian Art email on Tuesday this week featured this sculpture of the camel and the large stainless steel needle. Jesus said it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.



Camel (Abraham) Contemplating Needle (Large).
Sculpture by John Baldessari (1931-2009).
Executed in 2013.
Fiberglass, aluminum, stainless steel, acrylic and paint.
© Beyer Projects, New York

Jesus uses extremes, and exaggeration and hyperbole to teach his lessons.

With other parables the central character is God the Father or Jesus himself. But I don't think that's the way this one works. I think it's another illustration from the way the world is for us to extract a lesson for how we are supposed to be.

Jesus gives an illustration of a servant who doesn't know what they are supposed to be doing – so obviously gets it wrong and is thus beaten with blows.

But he contrasts a servant who DID know what he was supposed to be doing and didn't do it – so he deserves greater punishment.

So far so good – we get the picture. We are supposed to be diligent, faithful, energetic and consistent in our work for the Lord.

We should bear in mind this conversation is in response to a question from the disciple Peter, “is this for everyone or us?” This parable particularly strikes home to those in church leadership.

Is there anything more going on here?

There are themes in the background that Jesus alludes to frequently and I sought to tackle some of them a few weeks back.

Heaven and Hades and Gehenna.

The narrow gate and the narrow way lead to God’s kingdom, to heaven.

Many are shut out and continue their existence until the judgement. Hades is not a place anyone would want to be – there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. It’s here that hypocrites will go.

Jesus also refers to Gehenna, the place of annihilation and destruction, this is where evil will be destroyed.

In today’s parable we have exaggeration – the wicked servant is cut to pieces! And then Jesus adds on that those who have been disobedient and taken advantage of their position will be assigned to a place with hypocrites, those who say one thing but do another. Thank God the judgement in these matters belongs to Jesus not to us.

Some of you may have read the Lord of the Rings trilogy or perhaps seen the films.

It’s a vast sprawling narrative with a great many characters, but one is Denathor the Steward of Gondor. His family have been the Stewards for so long that he doesn’t believe that Aragorn the Ranger is in fact Aragorn Elessar the King of Gondor.

J.R.R. Tolkien, a committed Christian, a catholic weaved biblical themes through his narratives and the parables of Master and Servant are there in the story of The Return of the King.

But what are we to make of this today?

The first thing I want to say is that parables like today’s lead us towards **doing**. We are to **do** the Master bidding, whether in leadership or not we are to **do** the work in anticipation of the Lord’s return, not tiring or getting weary.

Sharing God’s love, living by faith, hope and love the work of the whole church should be towards building the kingdom.

We are also called to **BE**. To be a people transformed from within into the likeness of Christ. Not just a Martha doing the chores, but also a Mary sitting at Jesus feet listening. We are to do and we are to be. Christlike in character, Christlike in activity.

If we get too absorbed in doing...we can lose sight of who we are called to be. When I use the word Christlike, I don’t mean that we are clones, or identical. What makes the church so joyful and vibrant is the uniqueness of each individual. You being fully you, and Christlike in your uniqueness.

I want to tell you about Peter.

Following a request from Lynwood I went to pray with a man at the end of life. I discovered Peter was a life-long member of Holy Trinity, Bracknell. As far as I knew I didn’t know him.

He passed away the following day and I received a phone-call from the family asking if I would take the funeral. Because the focus of attention was, naturally enough, Peter, I didn't discover that I actually knew him until I was waiting around in the church, and his brother in law told me how he used to visit his wife Sue, who had Alzheimer's, every day and that she was in Dormy house.

Then it clicked. I knew Peter. Carol and Gilly lead the monthly communion, Jo and I go along to help out and I recall Peter very clearly indeed. So suddenly it was a completely different experience to what I was expecting. But that wasn't the best part.

His granddaughter gave the eulogy, his brother in law read the scripture, but before my sermon Peter's carer, Alice, came forward to say a few words.

She said – my name is Alice and when I came to care for Peter I was a broken person and had lost my faith in God. Before I arrived at the house, Peter had phoned the care agency and asked them what food I liked, so he could have it ready at the house. I have been a carer for many years, no-one has ever asked me what I liked.

Peter's kindness, and gentleness and love and friendliness have changed me. I re-found my faith and I thank God that I was sent to care for Peter.

Well as you could imagine anything I had to say after that wasn't of any great importance.

Peter was just being himself. A Godly man, a man transformed through his life by the patient work of the Holy Spirit and in the wonderful way God works he was just the right person to rescue Alice.

We are to live our lives ready to be caught out doing good, not ostentatiously or showily, but simply because doing good has become who we are.

Take heart in letting God continue to transform who you are and whether being or doing...may it be to his glory.

I've chosen "Good Shepherd of my Soul" as a song to respond.

Good Shepherd of my soul,
Come dwell within me;
Take all I am and mould
Your likeness in me.
Before the cross of Christ,
This is my sacrifice:
A life laid down and ready to follow.

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 21 August 2022