

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, September 18, 2022**

The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

*on*

Luke 16:1-13

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## **Towards an economy of grace**

We hear some uncomfortable words in today's Gospel reading: Jesus says to his disciples, "You cannot serve God and Mammon". What does this Greek word 'Mammon' mean? Some modern translations of the bible translate it as 'wealth' and even 'money' as if it were a commodity like a portfolio of investments. The parable of the dishonest steward who loses his job does seem to suggest that Jesus might be talking about money, but the word may actually have a deeper significance – referring to worldly things in which we put our trust.

The Gospel of Luke is often described as the 'Gospel for the Poor' – Luke has a particular interest in the marginalized - in women, in children, and in those who have nothing. There are numerous references to the poor having the Gospel preached to them and being raised up. Today's Gospel reading will prepare us for next Sunday's Gospel which is the parable of the rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day, and the poor man named Lazarus who lay at his gate covered with sores. Every time the choir sings the Magnificat, we hear that the proud are scattered and the lowly are lifted up, and this 'scattering' of the proud is the very same word used in today's parable to describe the actions of the dishonest steward who has now lost his job. The steward has been wasting or 'scattering' his master's goods.

Biblical Commentators have long tried to understand this particular parable of Jesus which has these strange words "*make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*" Does that mean we should have our bank manager round to dinner every week? Or stop criticizing the IRS? Of course, it is not as simple as that; Jesus is contrasting the ways of the world with the values of the kingdom and it is the words that come next that matter, and cut to the quick – "*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.*"

You cannot serve God and wealth – in other words, you have to have things in the right order; to get your priorities right.

Michael Ramsey used to teach that there was a simple natural order to creation; a natural hierarchy if you will: God, Man, Things. But, he used to teach, the fall of humanity shifted the natural order so that 'things' – including wealth and power and status - began to become more important than love of God, so that the order of creation began to look like God, Things, Man. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with terrible World Wars and the creation of weapons of mass destruction, Ramsey suggested that the natural order has become corrupted and completely reversed from what God had intended for us, with the hierarchy being now Things, Man, God.

So, with this in mind, back to the parable. We might assume that the steward who has been wasting his master's goods has been found out and that is the reason that he has lost his job. So what is puzzling is that he then quickly calls in his master's debtors and reduces their debts significantly. On the face of it, it looks as if he is now *defrauding* his master - if you will, getting his own back like a disgruntled employee who has just lost his job trashing his office or deleting all his computer files before he leaves. Perhaps worse, he is showing his boss's clients that his master had been overcharging them and, yet, his master *praises him*. It cannot be, surely, that the master is praising the steward for stealing his money! There must be something else happening here.

So now we have to put ourselves back in the time of Jesus. We know that, in biblical times, people took a commission for services rendered and it could well be that what we are reading here is a description of the steward reducing the debt *by removing his own commission*. If so, this would explain why the master is pleased (he hasn't lost what was owing him) and why Jesus then talks about making friends with 'mammon' by being shrewd in this world and making friends for the future.

By relieving the debts, the steward has changed the relationships between himself and those indebted to his master. He has turned the values of the economic system upside down – and, as I mentioned earlier, this is something that we find in Luke's Gospel time and time again. You could say that what the steward was doing was living a 'Magnificat moment' when the proud are scattered and the rich are sent empty away. Only, in this parable, it is the steward who effectively makes himself poor and empty. These 'values of the Kingdom' are at the heart of the Gospel of Luke and we do well to ponder them today.

Today's parable is apposite for us here as we meet in this amazing church amid the Fifth Avenue shops and, as we worship, thousands of people are walking by our church with their credit cards poised for use. Jesus challenges us and them to work out what our true treasure is; to work out what counts as 'mammon' for each one of us, for, of course, it may not be money at all. What is it that we serve that comes between us and God?

In his Book, 'Dethroning Mammon,' the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby explores the very themes of today's parable. He suggests that there is another economic reality that is the opposite of the ways of the world – of values, and exchange, and wealth creation. Like Jesus, he does not condemn wealth, but recognizes that it can affect our relationships with God and those around us when the balance of relationships is affected. He suggests that Christians, rich and poor, should also cultivate an economy of Grace – in other words, to recognize that the gifts of God are *freely* bestowed on each one of us. He uses the example of Mary, the sister of Lazarus pouring the expensive Nard or perfume on the feet of Jesus – valued at a whole year's salary - just before his Passion, and the reaction of Judas who held the purse-strings and his mean response. Mary represented the economy of grace – lavishly given by God; Judas represented the economy of mammon – seeing people and objects simply for monetary value. He says this:

*“Abundance and grace call us to be generous and trusting, in a way that builds links and relationships. Trust in the economy of God leads us to seek to give because to do so is to gain. The gain may be less tangible than our money was, and the revolution in our thinking that is required is enormous. We start with small steps, and will find that Mammon first shudders, then falls from the throne. No longer will his reign be supported by our own wrongful attitudes and the structures that dominate how we measure value and importance in our world”*<sup>1</sup>.

Jesus said, “You cannot serve both God and wealth.”

<sup>1</sup>. Justin Welby – 'Dethroning Mammon' p.129