

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

There are many, many reasons that I love having Rebecca as a priest colleague. One of them is that she holds me to a very high priestly standard. You may have noticed in recent weeks when it was very hot, I discarded the chasuble to celebrate communion. I was sweating like a pig underneath it and thought, "I cannot be doing that again." The next week it was even hotter, but Mother Rebecca carried on with the chasuble. Wouldn't discard it. And then she preached a sermon. The sermon was on an extremely difficult gospel passage. And as I was heard it being read, I thought to myself, "Goodness me, I'm glad it's not me preaching today. I wouldn't have gone anywhere near that. I'd have switched that for a much more straightforward reading." But Rebecca got into the pulpit and began her sermon by saying, "I never shy away from a difficult passage. I make it a point of principle to take it on and not to choose an easier passage." Well, I shrank. You probably couldn't tell, but inside I was retreating thinking to myself, "Goodness me, I'm being humbled here. I should listen and learn from my colleague." So, I resolved at that moment that I too would aspire to Rebecca's high standard and never shirk a difficult passage. I'd take it on.

Of course, I regretted that resolution this Monday morning as I read the gospel set for today. What on earth are we to make with this story and the whole passage? I've dodged preaching on it for 30 years, but today following Rebecca's lead, I'm taking it on. The actual story, the parable at the heart of the passage actually isn't that hard to understand. The story begins with the discovery that the manager is a crook. The exact nature of his crime isn't stated. We're told only that he'd squandered his master's property, which might suggest that he wasn't so much dishonest as just incompetent. But as the story goes on, he seems anything but incompetent.

Nevertheless, the manager is confronted with the crime and he makes no defense, which I think can lead us to assume that he was guilty. The master at this point, could presumably have handed him over to the police. But instead, he shows him to be more gentle and generous and just asks the manager quietly to leave his position. And at this point, the manager considers his options. He thinks to himself, "Well, I've got a bad back so I can't dig, and I've got my pride so I'm not going to beg. So, what am I going to do?" He thinks to himself.

Then he comes up with a cunning plan. One which he thought would mean that someone would take him in when the manager has put him out. So, he calls the master's debtors together. He says to the first one, "And how much do you owe?" And presumably he already knew the answer to that question. But anyway, the debtor says, "A hundred measures of oil," or about 850 gallons, the yield of 150 olive trees, so a large amount. The manager said, "Here, take your bill quickly and make it 50." Then he said to another debtor, "And how much do you owe?" And the reply came, "A hundred measure of wheat," which was about the yield of a hundred acres, so again, a large amount. "Make it 80," said the dishonest manager.

And the master, it seems, is then put in a bind. When he realizes what's going on, he has the option belatedly of calling in the police and restating the debts in full. But the problem with that is that along with the dishonest manager, he's already the toast of the town. Everyone saying, "Isn't it wonderful how generous this guy has been?"

I had a sense recently of what the master was going through at Vons. I was at the cashier, and I was absent-mindedly put my card in and I wanted some cash back. So, I tapped in a few numbers. And then I realized that I'd just made a very large donation to a charity that I'd never heard of. It was only after I'd done that it came up asking if I wanted cash back. Well, what could I do? I couldn't say to the cashier, "Look, I'm sorry. I've just given a donation to charity." I had my collar on at the time. "I've just made a donation to charity and I want to take it back." That didn't feel right. So, I just had to suck it up and get a bit of cash back, far less than I'd donated to charity. I felt as if I'd been duped. Something about what the owner of the estate's feeling in this gospel story. What could he do?

One thing that makes the story difficult is what the estate owner then says to the crooked manager. The gospel says, "He commended the dishonest manager because he had acted truly." Now at first sight, this seems to go against so much of the teaching of the gospels. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," not blessed are the shrewd.

So, what are we to make of this? Well, there's lots and lots of ways of reading this. I've read lots of them this week. Not many of them are compelling, but there are lots of readings and I'm just going to make the suggestion that this story of the dishonest manager can

teach us a couple of principles about godly financial stewardship. So here goes.

Two pieces of financial advice from a dodgy manager. The first is this, strategic generosity. So why does the boss commend the dishonest manager? I think it's because he admired the manager's strategic wisdom in devising and executing a plan which meant that he wouldn't be left destitute when his employment came to an end. Even though the master had been cheated, he felt he had to give the manager credit for being smart enough to think about the future in the midst of a crisis. And Jesus reinforced his commendation by adding this, "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light." And then he goes on to make a rather enigmatic reference to eternal homes. I think the point that Jesus is making is that we need to keep an eye on eternity. He's saying, "Look to the future. Look around you and see how the children of this age hustle to accumulate wealth, a wealth that won't last." He's saying, "Be as wise, be as shrewd, be as busy as them with your resources and continue to look to the future as you look to invest your resources in the future in the coming kingdom of God."

Imagine that you were living in the time of the Civil War and you've accumulated a large amount of Confederate currency. And suppose that you know for a fact that the Union are going to win, in which case your money would be useless. So what would you do? Well unless you were foolish, you'd cash in all your Confederate money for Union currency, only keeping enough Confederate money for the few basic needs for however shorter time that you feel you might need them. And Jesus is saying we need to act and live and have confidence in the coming kingdom. We need to be investing in that kingdom.

In 1956, 5 missionaries were martyred in Ecuador. And one of them, Jim Elliott, lived with this motto, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Jesus puts it this way, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." So, let's be like the dishonest manager and invest in the future.

The second piece of advice is a reminder that all things come from God. The manager in the story was playing with money that wasn't his own. So, too, the Bible constantly reminds us that all things come from God and we, too, are stewards of the resources that he has blessed us with. We need to be good stewards. Our wealth is not our own. It's a gift from God, and we are called to be faithful stewards of what he has given us. And we see so often we get our priorities the wrong way around. We can think of money and wealth as important, as being that which defines people. But Jesus contrasts, in this passage, wealth with what he calls true riches. We can buy a lifestyle, but we can't buy a life, which relates to Jesus's question, what will it profit someone to gain the whole world, but forfeit their soul?

There's an old fable about a poor man who was begging for food. And one day he heard that the king was coming through his town, so he rushed out to see him. He went early to get a good place. He took with him his pouch in which he had some fruit, a sandwich, a couple of coins and a piece of meat. And the king came down the road. And the beggar cried out. "Sir, give me a coin." But the king looked down to him and said, "You give me a gift," which he thought was odd. Being the king, he couldn't ignore it, so he searched around in his bag and all he wanted to part with were three crumbs. So he gave the king three crumbs and went on his way, and he went back crying. But when he emptied his bag at the end of the day, he found at the bottom of his bag that there were three little bits, crumbs of gold, exactly the same shape as the crumbs that he passed on. "Why," he moaned, "did I not give the king my best?"

The gospel ends with Jesus summing up what he's been saying in a very crisp binary sentence. You cannot serve God and wealth. There's a whole other sermon that could be preached on that text, but I won't begin. Instead, I'll sum up what I've been saying with some binary sentences of my own. God calls us to walk by faith. Money calls us to walk by sight. God calls us to be humble. Money calls us to be proud. God calls us to set our minds on things above. Money calls us to set our minds on things below. God calls us to look for unseen things. Money calls us to look towards things that are seen. God calls us to live for eternity. Money calls us to live for temporary things. Amen.