

22 Productive Servants

19: 11 - 27

There is one more parable to be told before the journey reaches its goal in Jerusalem, where the teaching of Jesus and of the prophets will be fulfilled. This last reminder was for those who thought that, as he was approaching Jerusalem, the kingdom of God would soon suddenly appear. It also has its importance for those who, two thousand years later, know that the kingdom has not suddenly appeared, but draw from that wrong conclusions about the relationship of the kingdom to current history.

A nobleman went off to a far land to be appointed king and then return. Before he went, he summoned ten of his servants and gave them ten pounds, telling them: "Trade with that until I come back." His fellow-citizens were opposed to him and sent a deputation after him to say, "We don't want this man to be king over us."

When he returned, having been given the kingship, he summoned the servants to whom he had given the money, to find out how each had managed. The first approached him and said, "Master, your pound has generated ten pounds." He said to him, "Well done, good servant, because you've been reliable in a small matter, you will be in charge of ten cities." Then the second came and said, "Your pound, Master, has made five pounds." And he said to him, "You, too, will be put in charge of five cities."

Then the third came and said, "Here you are, Master! I kept your pound wrapped up in a handkerchief. I was afraid of you, for you are a hard man, taking what you haven't contributed and harvesting where you haven't sown." He said to him, "Condemned out of your own mouth, you useless slave! If you knew that I'm a hard man, that I take what I haven't contributed and harvest where I haven't sown, why didn't you put my money into the bank? Then I would have got it back with interest." And he said to his attendants, "Take his pound and give it to the one with ten." They replied, "Master, he's already got ten pounds!"

The master was unbending. "I tell you, to the one who has, more will be given; from the one who has not, what little he has will be taken away. But as for my enemies who didn't want me to be king, bring them here and slauer them in my presence." (19: 12 - 27)

This would be a most shocking parable, if we had not already seen that Jesus is not fussed about where he gets his illustrations, as long as they make the point. He doesn't have our hang-ups. If a valuable point can be made or a lesson illustrated, it doesn't have to be a morally good person who does it. We are told to learn from the story of a vicious, arrogant and violent man without any "moral" ending, any suggestion of punishment for the tyrant. Rather, we are to learn from the punishment of a slave who lets him down and his punishment of those who opposed him. If we can swallow this one, we should have no problem with the crafty manager who cheated his boss.

Once again, Jesus is telling his hearers to learn from what they see around them, from the common history of the world they experience. Archelaos, successor to Herod the Great seems to have been the model for the master who was made king.¹ He had gone to Rome to have the will of Herod confirmed, and had been appointed ruler, in spite of a delegation of Jews who had followed him there to oppose his appointment. Jesus could probably count on his hearers recognising the allusion, in which case there would be even less need to comment on the fate of the tyrant. They would know that Archelaos fell out of favor and was deposed ten years later. That was why Jerusalem and Judea were now under the direct rule of the Roman governor.

The point of the parable is not in the tyrant's behavior at all, but in the way the various servants respond – how realistic they are in taking account of their position as servants of such a man. Some make good use of the resources he gives them, and are rewarded as useful and reliable servants. They are given positions of authority in the kingdom. The one who simply goes in dread of his master, but does nothing to carry out the master's will, is disgraced. Those who actively opposed the master's appointment are executed. It's like the story of the crafty steward; the point was how he used his brains to recognise the predicament he was in and to act accordingly.

It would seem that Jesus' main concern, as he nears the end of his journey – or the concern that Luke most wanted to remind us of – is that people would fail to realise the predicament in which they are placed by the coming of the kingdom, its total demand and its complete authority. Very soon now, another ruler, someone very different from Archelaos or the tyrant of the parable, will go to a far country to be made king. There will be those who oppose him, and they put themselves in deadly peril. And there will be servants of his left behind to make good use of the resources he leaves them. Their responsibility is serious.

¹ See the Jerusalem Bible, note on 19: 12

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The last teaching of the journey is a warning to those who find themselves confronted with the kingdom, and especially to those who are Jesus' followers. Their danger is that they might simply wait and try to hold their own until the kingdom is confirmed and the master returns. They might fail to rise to the full use of the resources he has left them, fail to act in the authority he has given them.

In the long course of his journey, and before that too, Jesus had been building up among his followers an understanding of their coming role and responsibilities. He had told Peter, the fisherman, that his job would be to catch people, but it is not just an evangelistic role, to spread information, or even to encourage other people to believe in Jesus and follow him. They and all those who want to respond to Jesus are to hear his teaching and to keep it. They are to listen and to do. They are to live in the pattern and by the rules he has given them, with the faith he found in the centurion, a faith that understands authority. Their following and their believing will have substance, and the substance is obedience. Those who belong to Jesus and to whom Jesus belongs, as his true family and kin, are those who hear the word of God, and keep it.

He had chosen twelve of his followers, like the twelve patriarchs or forefathers of the twelve tribes of Israel, for they were the founding of a new Israel, a new shaping of society for the people of God. When he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom, with authority to overthrow evil and power to heal, it was not just an evangelistic message about a future life. It was a proclamation, the kingdom or rule of God now taking place among them, present, as a beginning, in the power that overthrows evil and the compassion that heals. No wonder that Herod took an interest.

And again when he sent out seventy two ahead of him, to proclaim the kingdom and to heal the sick, he was imitating Moses, who shared his authority with the seventy-two elders who had received the spirit of God to fit them for judging and governing the people of Israel.² That had been a significant moment in the legal and civic development of the new Israelite nation, a movement from the simple structure under a single leader where everyone had looked to Moses as the founder and lawgiver in their community, to a more complex and organised society, with multiple office-holders and magistrates to respond to the many demands of a broad and growing population.

² Numbers 11: 10 - 30

And that had been the work of God, enabled by the giving of God's Spirit. Those who were endowed with the Spirit of God were selected not for a religious role, but for the civic and legal roles of judges and organisers in the community. This is the precedent to which Jesus points them, not the establishment of the priesthood or even the calling of the prophets, but what we would call the "secular" structuring of and care for society, the leadership on which the social order depends. The kingdom which the seventy-two are to proclaim is not located in another world or another, transcendental sphere, but is coming, establishing itself in this world, in their Palestine, as a new order for the people of Israel. It is already being organised; the authority of leadership is already going out from Jesus to the seventy-two others.

What Jesus had begun was not the founding of a church, as an institution separate from secular society, nor a religious movement focused on another world, with deeds and miracles in this world simply to prove its claims about the other. This was nothing less than a new ordering of society in Israel, soon to become a new ordering of society for the whole world. That is why we pray and receive the Spirit of God, not a private endowment for our own spiritual good or for "churchy" activities, but the very breath of God that transforms the world, transforming the humblest follower and making us leaders, rulers, servants in the new order which God is bringing about.

It's not a career to enrich or to satisfy egoistic ambition. Rather, it challenges us to give up everything, status, wealth, power. These go by the board when we are called to follow Jesus in the kingdom of God. We are to set aside fear, renouncing our accumulated possessions, and putting our trust in God, whose heart is set on giving us the kingdom. That gift is not a private possession, our individual heaven waiting beyond death and beyond the sky, but the very rule of God coming in sovereign love to transform the world. Our share in it is our humble and glorious service as stewards of the kingdom, caretakers and managers of the human world, the household of God the Creator, which will depend on us for its timely sustenance.

Jesus himself has an ordeal to undergo, a "Baptism" thru which he must pass before he can set the world on fire, but he has come to set the world on fire, and feels painfully the constriction and restraint upon him, until the ordeal is done. But he also sees, now, that his followers will be left in charge of that world. The fire will be lit among them. The harvest will be there for gathering, but they and many others will have to work to bring it in. They are the servants and managers who will be expected to look after the future until all is complete in the kingdom of God. They have the

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resources, and, in due course, will have to give an account of how they have put them to use.

The parable is for those who thought the kingdom would now come soon and dramatically, and did not realise the time and the active role it created for them.

The Son of Man, the Messiah whom Peter had recognised in Jesus, is going to be betrayed, arrested, humiliated and executed. He has been in conflict with the social structure of Israel from the beginning and now he is going to the very centre of organization, where its most powerful leaders base and exercise their strongest claims. He is going into his enemies' territory because there belongs the leadership of Israel, the role he must claim in order to come into his kingdom.

What awaits him in Jerusalem is not a mystical struggle with transcendent powers of evil, or a mysterious fulfilment of the will of God in sufferings that atone for sin, but a concrete revolutionary conflict. He is in conflict with the wealth and governing powers of his society and he will suffer the consequences, the usual fate of those who come into such conflict. Or rather, it is a mystical struggle, a path of obedience to the will of God, that will, in ways still mysterious to us because we do not trust them, put right our rebellion and establish the rule of God. It is this precisely thru being his conflict with the power of the world, the social order that embodies our hostility to God. Jesus will accomplish what saints and prophets imperfectly foreshadow by accomplishing what Che Guevara imperfectly foreshadows.

Those who follow him as King and Savior, as the one on whom the Spirit of God descended, the Son of God, will share in God's Spirit. They will be rulers and leaders in the way that he has shown them, in the Spirit's energy and adventure. When they pray "Your kingdom come", God will give them the work of the kingdom. They too will confront the world with God's authority. They too will be hauled before the magistrates, tried and condemned. They too will take up the cross of shame and suffering.

The danger of which they must be warned, now, on the verge of his dramatic entry into Jerusalem, is that they will think there is nothing for them to do but to wait for the imminent action of God; that they will forget that the world is in their charge; that they will not understand the resources and the authority they have been given; that they will be too timid, satisfied to preserve only what they already have, and reluctant to venture for the growth of the kingdom. The warning was not unnecessary.

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We should take stock of ourselves and our churches. The gospel itself, and the life, energy and adventure of the Spirit of God is what we have been given, and with that is everything else we have been given, as individuals, as a congregation, as communities. It is none of it just for us to have and enjoy, not even for us to have and preserve, but for us to make good use of. God who gives us his Spirit, expects us to show results.

Now there are those who think that the whole account is in terms of “spiritual” returns, pews filled, souls saved, churches planted or, because Jesus himself did it, bodies healed. But it is much more than that, and for every one of us it is a question of faithful obedience, doing what we have been given to do in the circumstance in which we have been placed. Not every one and not every church will be the same, and perhaps no two individuals nor any two churches will be the same. But we will be asked what we have done with our resources.

I would like to give an example: the church in which I have worked for the past thirty years, the Church of the Holy Family, in Blackbird Leys in Oxford, England. The church was founded fifty years ago when Blackbird Leys was built as a peripheral “estate” (a city fringe suburb) to house workers for the nearby factories and others reliant on local government for affordable housing. It is what we call in England a “Council Housing Estate”. Typically, its residents were on low income, altho initially the nearby car factory paid well. By the early 1990s, however, a high proportion were on very low wages or on benefits (welfare). Prospects for young people were discouraging, and achievement in school or career was generally low.

In the beginning, there were three prospective churches, but one of them, the Tyndale Congregational chapel, moving out from their more central location, bravely decided not to take up the land that was offered them, but to meet and worship in the new Anglican church. As time would prove, they chose wisely and set the pattern for a healthy development of church life in Blackbird Leys and Oxford.

Within five years the two congregations were one ecumenical church and now the church has five participating denominations. It is Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Moravian and Reformed, worshipping as one congregation with one team ministry. The Christian church denominations are one of our great resources. They are not, in my view, a burden of shameful division, but witness to the lively variety of the Spirit of God. In some places, it is

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good that we have different denominations pursuing different programs of activity and encouraging various modes of worship. In other places, it is much better that congregations come together and re-form one visible body for worship and action that draws on the resources and traditions of various denominations. That is what happened in Holy Family – not as a mere collecting of denominations, but as a recognition of the roles that these denominations can and do play in the diverse community that is Blackbird Leys. I believe it is an example of good use of a valuable resource: the generations of experience and practice that go to make up a denominational tradition.

The church and the community of Blackbird Leys grew up together. From the outset, the congregation, the ministers and the sponsoring denominations saw the mission of the church in terms of the local community to which it belonged. Their belonging in the community was a gift for the church and their belonging in the church was a gift for the community. Church members and ministers took a leading role in several community activities, but with service as leading, so that there grew up a tradition not of “church” activities for the community but of community organisations and activities in which the church played its part. An annual week-long festival, the Blackbird Leys Festival, owed a great deal to the leadership of the church, but it was not felt to be a “church” event. It was a celebration for the whole community, in which many of the community took part.

Now some would criticise this and the attention to community development: that the church participation was not evangelistic, and did not explicitly witness to the saving work of God, that it did not bring many people to church, or to Jesus Christ. Others would say that in everything we do with and for the community we are witnessing to the very essence of the kingdom of God and the gospel: the love of God.

I would say that our being together in the local community is the work of the love of God, a gift given to us, and that Godself (unlike the demanding tyrant) shows us how to use it, in the needs and opportunities that present themselves in our community life. It’s not for us to demand an evangelistic or spiritual or religious tag to be put on “our” events (“Sponsored by God”) but to celebrate and to share with enthusiasm, so that the community the Lord has given us becomes more of a community, richer, happier, more secure and confident.

The result has been, as I see it, twofold: a sense in the community (which is as secular and unchurched as any in England) that Holy Family Church is

our church, there for us; and a growth of community organisations and services which stand independent of the church, but in whose origin and early growth the participation of the church was vital.

My predecessor as Church Community Worker, Audrey Rowland, brought a touch of genius and commitment to the mission of the church and energised a great number of people, both from the congregation and from the wider community. In particular, she set up three important organisations: an advice centre (now the Agnes Smith Advice Centre) for help in a range of information and advice needs, particularly in the area of benefits (welfare) rights; the Blackbird Leys Adventure Playground for children's out-of-school activity; and the Family Support Group, which became a preschool playgroup.

Other church members were active in other areas of the community. Patsy Spencer and others from the Caribbean (West Indian) community set up the "Saturday School" which offered extra tuition in a range of subjects, with the content based on Caribbean and other "minority" history. It is they who made me aware of the story of Mary Seacole. The Caribbean community is an important part of Blackbird Leys, and a very significant proportion of the membership of Holy Family Church. Patsy's mother, Cora, takes an active role in a number of community organisations.

I'm not trying to single out the best or most important people, but those who, for now, best illustrate my point: the productive use of the resources we are given, in the context of a church and a modern community. People like these have been happy to see the community in which they live not just as a sadly churchless mass, nor as outsiders from whom the members of the church may be distinguished, nor as pew-fodder to be striven for, but as the rich human resource with whom we have been endowed, to be with them and to work with them to grow a community that is something more than we started with, a gift of God.

For a number of years after I became Church Community Worker in 1989, a significant part of my work was with preschool and family organizations. It grew out of the Family Support Group, which Audrey Rowland bequeathed to me. A new government-funded housing development, expanding Blackbird Leys by about 1500 dwellings was projected to bring from other parts of Oxford a large number of the city's homeless families, and a brief study of the City Council's homeless statistics showed that this would include a large number of children under 5 years old. It was clear to us in Holy Family Church, and to some local members of Oxfordshire Community

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Church that preschool facilities needed to be available as the families moved in.

The result was not a “church” project but a lively partnership of churches, local voluntary preschools, a business trust, housing associations, and county council departments, with funding from national government and charitable trusts. That partnership delivered a family centre, preschools and family activities across the estate. One of our workers brought together the two preschools operating on the estate and with two new ones being set up, established the Preschools Partnership, for which funding was raised jointly – not a common achievement in the local voluntary sector – and shared according to pre-agreed priorities.

Another most important involvement of the church, in my time as community worker, was the founding and building up of a local credit union, that is, a financial services co-operative specifically for the Blackbird Leys area. In this area, a large number of people living on very low incomes are only able to “budget” by taking loans from the loan companies which deliver on their doorstep and charge very high interest. People are locked into poverty by a continuous cycle of borrowing

The Credit Union encourages saving and, by lending at a much lower rate of interest, helps to get those who cannot manage without borrowing, on their feet and able to control their finances. It depends on the commitment of volunteers, on a level of community solidarity to minimise loan defaults, on fundraising to pay some staff and eventually the consolidation of an operation that can sustain itself financially without heavily burdening borrowers. This has been a huge undertaking for the initial group of volunteers, supported by a small church, and even after 20 years we have still a way to go on every one of those heads.

This is because, faster than targets are achieved, the call on credit union services has expanded. For instance, in an area where many people depend on weekly cash while the nation is more adjusted to a monthly electronic economy, the credit union has grown an extra layer of services where no charges are made: cashing cheques and facilitating the payment of wages and benefits. It might not be profitable business, but it is productive use of the resources we have for the benefit of our neighbors.

Coming where it does, at the end of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, the story of the pounds is not meant to be heard or interpreted on its own (the way we would normally hear it in church). It is meant to gather up and apply the teaching that Jesus’ disciples have received along the way. The resources,

the “pounds”, that they have been given include everything he has taut and promised them up to now. It is right, therefore, to recall that other parable of servants left in charge of their master’s household, and to be reminded that what we have been given, to turn it to profit, involves not just a bundle of “spiritual” gifts for religious activity, but the whole gifting of our lives and circumstances, for the well-being and the well-making of society, and of all God’s world.

Our response to the gospel in the Church of the Holy Family is not without its shortcomings and mistakes. On occasion we have mishandled the relationship between the church as a community and the activities that engage with the whole neighborhood. For my part, as the (now retired) community worker, I see that I have not engaged the worshiping congregation as much as should have been. And for some time we have wrestled with the issue of giving witness to our own motivation – the reasons for what we do, as Christians – instead of letting it be received as merely hearty benevolence.

In all that, we have been, and still are, learning. But we know that it is the work God has given us, and faith must be obedience. We strive to be productive servants, and we ask God to give his Spirit so that the work will be well done; and we welcome the labourers God sends for the harvest, whether or not they come with church credentials. Some of them come as declared atheists. It is all a work that is wonderfully blest in the hands of God, and we ask God our Father to forgive our shortfall.

Community development, the Advice Centre, the Blackbird Leys Festival, the work for families and young children, the commitment to action in the Caribbean community, the welcome given to a large new housing development, the Adventure Playground and the Credit Union, might not be evangelism and it might not be church growth, but it is the work that God has given to Holy Family Church in Blackbird Leys, and, undertaken with obedient faith, it has been productive. Let God judge how productive and to what ultimate end.