

Proper 20 Year C 2022 (RCL)

The two letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus are collectively known as the pastoral letters. They are concerned with church order, leadership and pastoral oversight in the churches, and with the ever challenging presence of false teachers threatening the social and theological fabric of the church. In the Mediterranean world of the time, the bedrock of any society was the family, and the writer of this letter, let's call him Paul for convenience, aims to form Christian congregations after the pattern of a household, a household of faith (1Tim 5.15). The members of the church of which Timothy is a leader had conflicting tensions; on the one hand they were member of a secular household, with 'kings and those in high positions' to be acknowledged- the civic world they lived in; on the other hand they were members of a sacred household, with God, the only God, as head. Paul writes (v4) that God wants everyone to be saved - and that being the case the practices of God's household should aim its common life in that direction - the salvation of all people. There is no ducking behind the parapet there, is there? It hardly seems conducive to 'a quiet and peaceable life' amongst people whose primary focus of worship is the Emperor.

Into this situation, Paul writes his instructions. 'First of all' he writes (words missing from today's text as printed, but there in the Biblical text - 'First of all', of primary importance, PRAY - whether you call it prayer, supplication, intercession or thanksgiving - PRAY. And don't just pray for yourself, or for the church family, pray for everyone. Pray for the Emperor, but not to the Emperor; pray for peace, not for military victory and imposing your rule on someone else; pray for Ukraine and for Russia; pray together in church as the household of faith. Corporate (or 'common') prayer is very powerful - have we not seen this week, following the death of the queen how people wanted to come together to pray. Yes, you can pray anywhere and everywhere - some of us do - but those of us who have been members of silent prayer groups (sometimes call meditation or contemplation) will know that sitting silently praying together always feels more powerful than doing it on your own. (Perhaps it is time to re-start that type of meeting). Prayer for 'kings and those in high positions' suggests a Christian mission that boldly evangelises the surrounding pagan or indifferent culture from top to bottom. This is mission at its most basic and powerful. The last few days have shown how much our civic and our religious

lives are intertwined as we pray for the queen and the new king, but Christianity is not a civic religion, the church is under God and our prayer and our actions must mark us out as belonging to God. Paul writes to Timothy 'there is one God, and one mediator who gave himself a ransom for all' Again the emphasis on all, everyone. So, as much as we are called to care for the household of faith, we must keep before us the knowledge that God's plan for salvation includes everyone, everywhere and no matter how long it takes. As a 'teacher to the Gentiles', Paul stands in opposition to those members of the church of Jewish origin who insisted that Gentile converts should, indeed must, become Jewish proselytes (see Acts 15). He will not have 'us' and 'them'. That is why prayer should be offered for everyone. The purpose and content of our prayer must serve the purposes of God. Doing that in the complex world we live in can be a challenge. Think of the challenge we face in today's Gospel reading, sometimes call the parable of the Dishonest Steward. Is Jesus praising dishonesty? Surely not! Is he advocating the use of dishonestly gained money? Most unlikely! This is a very difficult parable to interpret. The first thing to point out is that the master does not commend the manager for his dishonesty but

for his shrewdness - indeed, he might not have been dishonest; the discounts he offers the debtors might have been his commission for arranging the loans. As he was to be dismissed, not disciplined, it sounds as if he was an independent agent acting for both parties in these transactions. Thus the steward is accepting a present loss in the hope of a future gain - he is investing. It is this that the rich man commends. And that is probably where the parable ends, and the rest in commentary, spoken not to the crowds but to the disciples.

But what if the master is God and the steward is Israel? Israel is supposed to be God's property manager, the light of the world, responsible to God and set over God's possessions. But Israel, as we have seen so often in Luke's Gospel, has failed in the task God has given it and is under threat of dismissal. What to do? The Pharisees want to make Israel more holy by piling on the Law - Jesus takes the opposite view. He welcomes sinners and eats with them. He wants Israel to make friends, or at least not make enemies, where ever it can - that is what the children of the world would do; that is what the children of light (Israel) should do, learning how to navigate the crisis which is coming upon them. The steward had some time to plan his future. Israel is running

out of time - they need to look at the treasure they have, their covenant relationship with God - and use it wisely and honestly; to seek social justice, personal responsibility, help for the poor, widows and orphans, the stranger in the gate. This is their wealth, to be used for the purposes of God - otherwise they will be dismissed. It is a call to faithfulness.

So, from the parable of the Master and the Steward, Luke moves us on to teaching about money - with strong and explicit warnings about the dangers of wealth - and the warnings begin with the word I have just used - faithfulness. 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much'. Money is not a possession, it is a trust. God entrusts us with property and talents in the expectation that we will use both to his glory and for the welfare of his children. And if we don't learn faithfulness in the use of wealth and talents, we will be torn between two masters, and Jesus tells us sternly that we cannot serve both - 'You cannot serve God and wealth'. It is a conversation about the connection between resources and relationships. Reflecting upon the steward's actions with the master's debtors, what means do we use to accomplish good ends? What are our motivations around the relationships we forge and foster (how to make friends and

influence people!) How are our relationships economically influenced? Perhaps more importantly, how influenced are we, in developing relationships - by class, wealth, education, even colour or gender? Do those relationships include those whom Jesus called 'the least of these'?, those you should have fed and watered, visited, clothed?

Serving God means that loving people is always the priority, the bottom line. No wonder Jesus concludes his teaching on wealth with those memorable words 'You cannot serve God and wealth'. No ifs. No buts, as someone said recently - the difference being that Jesus meant it.