

The parable of the dishonest manager

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Season of Creation III – Pentecost + 15 –Jer 8 18-91, Ps 79 1-9, 1st Tim 2 1-7, Lk 16 1-13

Children: There's a soft toy called Jeremiah the Bullfrog; he's big, soft, green with spots, a worried look on his face, and he has a rough, croaky voice. I wonder what made them call their frog Jeremiah. Maybe his croaky, grumpy voice made them think of the prophet Jeremiah. People didn't like how the prophet Jeremiah spoke. We'll hear from him in a minute, so you can see what you think of him. Jeremiah kept warning his people about the dangerous hot water they were in. He told them that they should stick with God. Otherwise, enemy countries would take them over. Oh, and hot water's dangerous for frogs; ask anyone.

People don't like warnings. We don't like anyone telling us to stop doing what we like. Anyone who does that used to get told to stop being a Jeremiah. That's how we tried to make them keep quiet. I think poor old Jeremiah the prophet would have liked to keep quiet, because people did terrible things to stop him talking. But God wanted him to keep on warning them, and so he did, no matter how lonely it made him.

That makes me wonder; should we think of Jeremiah the Bullfrog – the soft toy – as someone who warns us. Did you know that the hotter the climate gets, and the more pollution and rubbish we make, some of the first creatures disappearing are frogs? They're a bit like us; if things get slowly worse – slowly hotter – they don't notice, so they stay put until it's too late. They don't seem able to notice the danger. And soon, they're gone. They're like a lot of us people, aren't they.

And we have to listen and change. Anyway, let's listen to Jeremiah the prophet.



Sermon – Luke 16.1-13: This story is usually called the parable of the dishonest manager or the unjust steward. It's a challenging story. After the manager was dismissed, it tells how he secured his future by giving enormous reductions in the rent that local tenant farmers owed his master. The tenants would naturally believe he was doing his master's bidding – that he wasn't doing anything wrong. But he'd be credited with engineering this reduction, so he'd always have lots of friends in the village. So the tenants would celebrate the master's great generosity and also love the manager.

The master would have seen the writing on the wall the moment those falsified accounts were in his hand. If he went down to the village to tell everyone it wasn't legitimate, his name would be mud. The manager bet that his master wouldn't risk that; and he was right. It stayed a secret and so the manager got off scot free. A very elegant scheme. So should he be called a dishonest or unjust manager? Let's see.

In his Earth Bible commentary on Luke, *About Earth's Child* pp 214-16 Michael Trainor opens up different dimensions to this story. Michael begins by reminding us that Jesus is telling this parable only to his disciples – to us. Michael reads the parable from the perspective of its near-eastern culture. He also reads it from the perspective of Earth, and with the conviction that the whole Earth Community was given by God – was given equally for all; not just so the powerful could grab it and take control.

Michael reminds us that in that time and culture, when Jesus identifies the land-owner as *wealthy ... [it] automatically means he's greedy. In a world of limited economy, he's achieved his wealth at the expense of the poor, those who, in*

the parable, are his debtors.

We're meant to read this from the perspective of the tenant farmers, like the disciples would have. Then we'd see how Luke shows us a manager *working out ways to help the wealthy share their possessions with the poor.* For the disciples, the manager has *acted as an authentic disciple; he's dispersed wealth for the benefit of all.* cf Acts 2.44-46 – also from Luke's pen

Michael highlights the fact that the commodities owed to the master are Earth products – olive oil and wheat. He also points out that the quantities are huge – 100 measures of olive oil is 3,500 litres, and 100 measures of wheat is two to three acres worth.

These excessive amounts owed to the master illustrate his greed and his attitude to Earth. These fruits are for his own benefit and status; their accumulation deprives others.

In the face of such greed in Middle Eastern eyes, Michael sees this parable presenting the manager as something of a hero for everyone concerned.

His master will be greatly honoured for what the manager has done, so even he commends the manager for his shrewdness. And everyone in the village benefits from their reduced debts. Earth is restored again to rightly being the source of God's impartial blessing for all.

So the manager appears as *the disciple concerned about the harmony of every member ... of Earth's household. For the benefit of all, he redistributes wealth – which is unrighteous mammon* – and in terms of this parable he is a model for all disciples to follow.

So what does that mean for us as disciples of Jesus?

The main thing is that we're called to focus on things from the perspective of the little people, and on the perspective

of the Earth.

The little people – hear Jeremiah and all the prophets: *‘For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn and dismay has taken hold of me.’* ^{Jer 8.21} God is crying to us to do something about the obscene, growing disparity between rich and poor. We – the Church – are big enough to be heard. There’s always a twin strand to this Season of Creation; justice for Earth and justice for the poor. We should not just lie down and accept the catastrophic consequences of unlimited economic growth and unfettered accumulation – it is something which we disciples must challenge.

If Michael’s reading of this parable is to be taken seriously, we are called to actively challenge these evils. Earth is suffering – Earth is abused, insulted, belittled endangered; people, birds, animals, frogs, fish are suffering, abused, insulted, belittled, endangered – by the doctrine of unlimited growth and consumption which is destroying our biosphere.

Our study group is seeking to keep positive during this Season of Creation – to focus on what we can do to improve things; to protect and encourage thriving. Yet Jeremiah reminds us that God also calls for evil to be named and exposed for what it is.

So today, I offer a prose-poem from a modern prophet who has done this, the American poet, Mary Oliver.

Of The Empire

We will be known as a culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for the penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All

the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.

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My prayer is that the worldwide Church can hear this warning – that we can turn and help the world to hear this warning – that we can turn and envision positive change and inspire the world to open up to better ways of being here together. Amen

A topical book-launch which took place at the Effective Living Centre yesterday

<https://www.facebook.com/effectiveliving.org/videos/471604664867688>