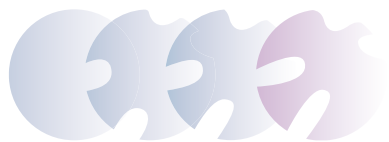


Sermon reflections

by Dr Jane Williams
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The unforgiving servant



Reflection Questions

1. How important is the fear of debt in making our financial decisions? (See also Proverbs 22:7)
2. How might 'living in God's economy' affect our financial decisions, especially when it may not affect those around us?
3. How aware are we of the reality of indebtedness in our community and of sources of help and advice?

There are all kinds of things about this story that alert us to the fact that it is just that: a story. It's provoked by Peter's question to Jesus: how many times do we have to forgive people?

Peter has clearly got the point that forgiveness is important to Jesus, and he wants a bit of guidance about just how important. So the story makes Jesus' answer as dramatically clear as it can – forgiveness is like oxygen: it is the air we breathe, if the world we live in is God's world.

The story element comes out partly through the unlikeliness of some of what happens. To begin with, the first slave owes a ludicrous amount. It is unimaginable that anyone could run up such debts, and certainly beyond belief that a slave would be allowed to. In the story, this level of exaggeration makes it clear that there is absolutely nothing the slave could ever do to repay his master. He is, after all, already a slave: he and all he has already belong to the master, even before this preposterous debt is brought in. Already, the story is making it clear that the kind of transactional answer Peter wants isn't going to work.

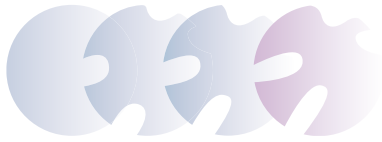
If the story were really about repaying debts, then the next action of the slave is the right one. He has just been allowed to go free from a huge burden of debt, and he is determined never to get into such a state again. So he attempts to reclaim what is owing to him from another slave. Surely that is the sensible thing to do, to start to get his finances back on an even keel?

So it is the other slaves who point us to the heart of the matter. They know that the whole situation stinks, and they go to remonstrate with the master. Slaves should not be allowed to get into debt; they should not be forced to keep accounts with one another. They belong, body and soul, to the master and cannot have any private transactions on the side. Everything they have is his.

This, then, is the answer to Peter. We are not in a position to make decisions about what is due to us or to others, because we live in God's economy, not ours. If everything we have and are is already God's, then anything anyone else 'owes' us is also God's. We cannot choose to live in one kind of economy, where we know we can rely on God's forgiveness for ourselves, while operating in another kind of economy with others, where we make the judgements. We are either God's people, or we aren't. And if we are, then we are free: no debts and no debtors. ■

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Labourers in the vineyard



Reflection Questions

1. 'Millionaires seldom smile' (Andrew Carnegie). How might our fear of losing out affect our attitude to sharing and generosity?
2. How is our generosity affected by what we see happening around us rather than by what God has given to us?
3. 'Nothing is more radical to the wealthy than being told all they have is a gift' (W. Brueggemann). What does this parable teach about work and reward?

On the face of it, this is a classic parable that emphasises the difference between God's standards and ours. We can't help feeling a little sympathy for the all-day labourers; our sense of fair play suggests that they do have a point: they have worked all day in the heat, and should get more than the people who've just done a couple of hours after the sun was past its fiercest. 'It's not fair' is one of the earliest things children learn to say, and the sense that life should be just goes deep. So, when we are told that God sees justice differently, that is a seismic shift in our world view.

Already, then, this is a disturbing parable, because it reminds us that none of us has any claim on God, so we can hardly accuse him of being 'unfair'. God is doing far more than any of us deserve by employing us in his 'vineyard' at all.

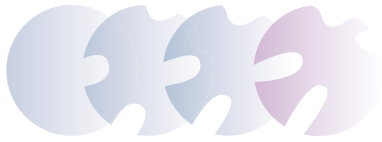
But Jesus' hearers would have known at once that this was also a parable about Israel. The 'vineyard', for those who know their Hebrew Scriptures, is always the good land that God's people hold as gift from God. So now this parable is also about failings of God's people. But what exactly have they failed to do? What exactly are the 'wages' that God is, unfairly in the opinion of the people, giving to those who don't deserve them?

The answer that chimes well with the priorities we see in Jesus' mission is that God is offering forgiveness to those who have not been obedient to the Law. The Gospels tell us that Jesus is often accused of mingling with tax-gatherers and sinners, sharing the love of God with those who have not worked for it. This does make a lot of sense in this context: in the chapter before this, Jesus has just had a conversation with the rich young man who has kept all the commandments but fears that he is still missing something vital. In response, Jesus tells him to sell everything that he has and give it to the poor. And that is just the kind of mad generosity displayed by the owner of the vineyard.

The heart of Jesus' critique in this parable, then, seems to be that we, like the rich young ruler, want to know that God thinks we are great, while God longs for us to share his love with others. Our 'wages' won't be diminished if shared with others, the vineyard owner assures us; all that will happen is that others, too, will benefit. Is that so unfair? ■



The wicked tenants



Reflection Questions

1. 'Of your own do we give you': if God is the real owner of everything how might this change how we think and act around 'our' money?
2. What pressures today encourage us to hold tight to our stuff rather than practise generosity?
3. What does it mean for us today to be fruitful and to honour God with what we earn? (See Deut. 26:1-11)?

The context of this passage is vitally important to its meaning. Matthew 21 is full of mounting tension and escalating violence. It starts with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where Jesus is greeted by cheering crowds whose reaction makes it impossible for the authorities to ignore Jesus any longer, even if they wanted to.

Then Jesus' cleansing of the Temple adds another provocation. Now both religious and civil authorities have to be seriously worried: Jesus is more or less throwing down the gauntlet to them.

So, when he curses the unfruitful fig tree and tells the story of the man with two sons, one who cooperates and one who doesn't, it is perfectly clear to all who are listening that this is aimed at Jesus' opponents: he is calling them unfruitful and uncooperative. When they try to challenge him to explain himself, he refuses.

And then, in the parable of the wicked tenants, in verses 33-46, Jesus confronts head on the hostility that is building towards him and the response he knows it is going to provoke. So we meet the tenants of a vineyard who delude themselves that, not only can they keep the master's share of the produce, but also that they can actually claim the whole vineyard as theirs, if they kill the master's son.

All Jesus' listeners would recognise the vineyard. It is clearly the self-same vineyard of Isaiah 5, which is explicitly called 'Israel' (v.7), and which refuses to bear fruit, despite

all the care that the owner has poured into it. Jesus develops Isaiah's image. Now the vineyard is not at fault, just those who should tend it and know whose vineyard it is. The tenants are not only wicked, they are also stupid, because the vineyard can never be theirs, however violently they treat the master's servants and his son; they are only laying up fiercer retribution for themselves.

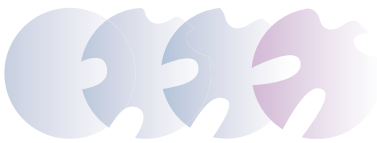
But while, in context, the outlines of this parable are clear, and they show Jesus' grim realisation of the probability of his own death, there are still some puzzles. In particular, it is not immediately clear what produce it is that the tenants are supposed to be harvesting for their master, but instead are trying to keep for themselves.

This time, we need an even wider context to help us get to the heart of this story. In Genesis, God's instructions to the human creation are that they should be 'fruitful' and should cultivate the rest of the world on God's behalf. This is the call that God then gives to Abraham and his descendants: that, when they receive the Land from God, they should live in it as God's representatives.

But instead, Abraham's descendants come to believe that the promise of relationship with God is theirs unconditionally, not as representatives of the whole human creation, not as those who help to renew the image of God in the world, but simply as the people God dotes on and will never discard. Even the presence of God's own Son cannot bring them back to their real calling, to be image-bearers for the sake of others. ■



The wedding feast



Reflection Questions

1. What is it about the day-to-day business of money that so easily captures our whole attention?
2. Do we overestimate our concerns and underestimate the change in our financial lives that God requires? (See also Haggai 1)
3. 'Because money is a means to so many ends it becomes an end in itself.' How do these words of John Hull help us explore this parable?

The parable of the wedding banquet is a grim one. In it, Jesus says all kinds of things that we'd rather he didn't. In particular, verses 11-14, where the badly-dressed guest is beaten up and thrown out, are hard to preach as good news. Wherever does this odd, violent picture fit in? Surely, if the wedding guests didn't know until the last minute that they were even invited, they can hardly be blamed for coming without the conventional wedding clothes?

So, as always with Jesus' parables, it is important to remember that this is a story. It is not a prediction of what will happen, but a vivid plea for imaginative engagement. Its bleak and foreboding tone is dictated by the setting: the conflict between Jesus and his opponents is escalating to the point where they are now quite openly trying to trap him into something that will give them serious ammunition against him, as the next part of this chapter shows. They are no longer listening to Jesus and trying to assess him; they are no longer making any attempts at all to understand him or find out if he has good grounds for his mission. They are simply out to get him.

Hence this story, with all its twists and turns, and all its unpalatable anger. The story starts with a ludicrous premise: that anyone invited to a royal wedding would turn down the invitation or prefer to spend the time doing the kinds of mundane things that could be done on any other day. At the last minute, with the dinner all ready and waiting, the king's invitation is urgent: this cannot wait. But the guests apparently entirely fail to agree with the king about priorities: they see no great importance in this wedding; they find their own concerns far more pressing.

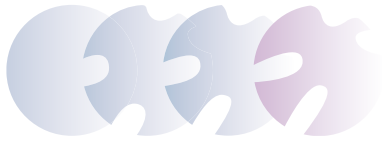
So the sheer, pressing urgency of this invitation is one of the major themes of the story, and the two sets of protagonists are moving at very different paces. While the king and his emissaries are dashing around, trying to get everything sorted in time, the invited guests are examining their nails and picking their teeth. They have simply not understood.

In John's Gospel (John 3:28-29), John the Baptist compares Jesus to the bridegroom, and Jesus makes the same comparison himself in Mark 2:19-20. Clearly, then, in this parable, the 'wedding', the great occasion that cannot wait, the pressing invitation that must be answered, is Jesus' own presence and ministry. This is the window of opportunity, and there will not be another one.

The invited guests have overestimated the timescale, their own importance and the importance of their own concerns. They think they are the centre of everything but, actually, they are replaceable. Suddenly, they're out of this story altogether, because they didn't know what it was really about.

And now the underdressed wedding guest springs into the light: the king is still the king; this is still a royal wedding; guests are easy to come by. No one at this great event can be complacent, all must be prepared. ■

Render to Caesar



Reflection Questions

1. Is Jesus Lord of our wealth or does the way we deal with money put God back into a 'safe religious box'? (See also Luke 19:1-10)
2. Are we as careful to honour God in our regular giving as we try to be careful with money in day-to-day living?



Jesus' answer to the trick question about taxes has been used to justify all kinds of political and economic positions. In particular, it lends itself to a view that faith is private and shouldn't enter into the political or economic sphere. But given that the saying comes out of the mouth of a religious leader who is shortly to be executed, that is hardly a tenable reading of the passage.

Jesus' questioners believe they have thought up a way of getting Jesus into trouble, whatever answer he gives. If he suggests that his nation, living under Roman occupation, should not pay taxes to its oppressors, then he is a revolutionary who can be denounced to the authorities. If, on the other hand, he says that people should pay the invaders' tax, then that great group of ordinary people who cheered him as their liberator as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey will become disillusioned, and he'll lose his power base.

So Jesus' response is a very neat sidestep. But it is much more than that: it is also a challenge. The Roman coin, used for paying the imperial tax, is a claim to power. Engraved on it are symbols of authority and a demand for recognition. But, implicitly at least, the Jewish people have already set a limit to their submission. The Roman coins are not allowed in the Temple; in that sacred place, Caesar's claims are not recognised. So Jesus' answer is actually turning the question right back on to those who asked it in the first place. How are they going to demonstrate where they believe real power lies? What can it possibly mean to one of God's own chosen people to say that there is anything in the world that belongs to Caesar rather than God?

This is not, then, Jesus giving permission for a separation between church and State but, quite the contrary, it is Jesus directly challenging his interlocutors about their own priorities. They think they can ask a clever question about political allegiance, with no further consequences for themselves, but Jesus is challenging them to define what it means to say that the Lord reigns. If God is king, then there is no sphere of their lives in which God's people do not owe him their loyalty.

When, in John's Gospel, Pilate asks Jesus 'What is truth?', we see the supreme irony of one who wouldn't recognise truth if it slapped him in the face asking such a question of the source of all truth. And here, in Matthew's Gospel, the same bitter irony is at work: Jesus, God's own Son, has come to his people to announce the presence of God with them, and all they want to do is to get rid of Jesus and put God back in his safe religious box.

Jesus is about to give God what is God's – his life. What do we not owe God? ■