Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.
Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question
Think of a time when you have wrestled with a question without any obvious answers. How did this lack of resolution make you feel?

Prayers of Renewal

God of relationship,
you bring renewal in tired places,
and set us free to follow you into a hope-filled future.
Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the wounds and fractures in our community:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:
Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments…

God of new beginnings, of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us. **Amen**

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Magnificat (Singing the Faith 793)

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed;
the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is his name.
He has mercy on those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm
and has scattered the proud in their conceit,
casting down the mighty from their thrones
and lifting up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
to remember his promise of mercy,
the promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen

Reading Luke 16:1 – 13

Sermon

The great moral philosopher and social commentator Mary Poppins once declared that a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down in the most delightful way. Yet, anybody who's had to swallow really foul-tasting medicine that cannot be sweetened might well disagree! There are some things it simply isn't helpful – or even possible – to sugarcoat, and today's Gospel reading is one of them. Often viewed as the most complicated, and perplexing, of Jesus's parables, it has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways down the centuries. Thus, we find ourselves in the same situation as somebody watching *BBC News* on a Saturday evening, who wants to avoid seeing the football scores before *Match of the Day* comes on – if you don't want to see the results of how challenging biblical interpretation can actually be, then look away now! Furthermore, if you are of the view that the job of the preacher is to provide the one, true interpretation of any given text then I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you! This parable is proof, if ever we needed it, of the inadequacy of a way of approaching the Scriptures that prizes certainty over taking the text seriously enough to admit different interpretations.

Our problems begin, though by no means end, with the way in which Luke *himself* appears to be struggling to know what to do with it! He postulates – according to the New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd – at least three interpretations, which come across as the 'punchlines' for a sequence of sermons. Firstly, the 'children of light' should learn from their corrupt neighbours – about which the Greek might equally fairly be translated as shrewdness, prudence, or wisdom. Secondly, we should put 'dishonest wealth' to some use, by utilising it to make friends. And, thirdly, in order to be trusted with 'true riches', we must demonstrate honesty when faced with 'ordinary' wealth. Hence, we may be wondering what is going on – is Jesus telling us to use sharp business practices to further our own ends, or inviting us to buy our tickets into heaven? Now, I do not think for a moment that this is the case, not least because the reading ends with a stark warning about how we cannot serve both God and mammon at the same time. The term 'mammon' is sometimes translated as 'wealth', but if we return to the original Aramaic, it encompasses a whole gamut of things we might focus upon – power, status, privileges, and titles, for example. These things certainly do intersect with material riches, but go much deeper in their seductive power to lure us away from God.

So, if there is more going on than apparent at face value, what is it? The crux of the challenges we face comes in verse eight, where the dishonest steward is commended by the master for acting prudently (or shrewdly or wisely, depending on how we see it). One of the few subjects which commentators do agree on is that the 'master' is the character in the parable, and in this case does not represent Jesus, although he does sometimes get given that title by the disciples and others. However, this does not in-of-itself sweeten the bitter taste of the medicine which Jesus is giving us here – why is somebody in a position of responsibility and power, who has behaved in a way that entirely justifies the allegations of dishonesty levelled at his door by his employer, being commended?

The job of a steward was to collect rent and debts for the managers, and they were allowed to add interest on to the amount owed, which they took as their payment. It could be, therefore, that the steward's

plan was to remove this additional charge to his master's debtors in order to work his way into their good books; so says Michael Patella. Tom Wright, on the other hand, argues that because Jewish people were not permitted under the Law of Moses to make money through charging interest on loans, they got around this by taking payments in kind instead, with oil and wheat being common options. By letting debtors off the interest, the steward put his master in a bind – calling his employee out risked exposing his sharp business practices. Still others see the commendation of the steward as simply praise of his resourcefulness when his back was against the wall, and yet others suggest the master was actually being sarcastic. I don't know about you, but I reckon it's not hard to see why this is such a tough parable out of which to make any sense! It begs the question: if we can't pin *this* aspect down easily, is there *anything* positive we can say?

Well, we can note its very particular place in Luke's Gospel. It forms a bridge between, on the one hand, three parables illustrating God's care for sinners and others the Pharisees thought disreputable, and on the other hand, a section of Jesus' teaching on wealth beginning with the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (16:19 – 31). Today's story contains both 'sinners' and a rich person somewhat lacking in ethics – I wonder how that went down with those Pharisees branded as 'lovers of money' by Luke (16:14)? We might also say something about the wider context of this Gospel, with its multiple instances of the standard order of things being reversed. Consider, for example, the rich man who ignored Lazarus, and is forced to beg for his help, or the prodigal son welcomed back home, despite squandering half of the family fortune. In the opening of today's passage, the steward squandered his master's property (16:1), with the Greek word used for 'squandered' being legitimately translatable as 'scattered', which is what God vowed to do to the 'proud' (1:51), in the Magnificat. The Kingdom of God often takes the everyday rulebook, and tears it up, in dramatic and challenging ways.

Something of this 'reversal of fortune' dynamic is at play in this text, as a result of that dishonest steward's actions. It is likely that he was of high social status, not least because of the large amounts of grain and oil which he was apparently dealing with (16:6 – 7). Yet, through reducing the outstanding obligations of his master's various debtors by not insignificant amounts, he established far more reciprocal and egalitarian types of relationships with them founded not upon power or status but on friendships. After all, he would be dependent on the hospitality, as somebody who was ashamed to beg and no good at manual work, of the same people he had once towered above in the social hierarchy. All of this came about because of a crisis situation, as in many of Luke's parables – could it be that this is often the time when God is most at work?

So, given all of this, what are we to make of this challenging reading, and what does it have to say to us today? Well, in attempting to put my thoughts down on paper, I found them drifting back to where we began and the need to really take the Biblical text seriously. It brings to mind a lesson which I learnt many years ago. My first experiences of theological study occurred not when training for ordained ministry but as a PhD student, in Durham. I'd been walking along the beach, in the freezing cold of Tynemouth, thinking about how to occupy my time when I'd finished my thesis. When I got home, there was a card on the mat inviting me to do a part-time theology degree course, run by the diocese. I figured that, while it might be a coincidence, it may have been a big hint, and as the fees were minimal, I figured I'd give it a go! The first essay we had to do was on the interpretation of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which is basically the 'prologue' to the Bible. I enjoyed learning about competing scholarly approaches coming from different perspectives, that reached varied conclusions about these chapters. The crunch came when I had to pick one…

Not having any Hebrew or Greek meant I could not consider the text in its original format, and I didn't yet feel qualified to choose between

the works of people who'd spent years studying this stuff, compared to my few weeks! After being told by my tutor to 'just get on with it!', I looked at them again, finding strengths and weaknesses within all of their interpretations. I remember telling my housemates about the frustration of knowing that nobody was going to give me the 'correct' answer at the end of this, but later that day, it hit me that *there might not actually be a correct answer to find!* Given the loudest voices in Durham were those in the Christian Union, who not only believed in the existence of a 'right answer', but were certain they had it, I found myself coming to the conclusion that it needed a different approach. I had to learn to live with the question marks.

Consequently, I am going to leave you with different ways of looking at today's parable, and let you make your own minds up. If we were to pop down the pub with Tom Wright, for example, he would tell us that the first hearers of this parable would have instantly associated the steward with Israel and the master with God. Israel had failed to be shrewd managers of God's property because they had struggled to be the 'light to the nations' that God had created them to be. Their response was to tighten up the way in which the Law of Moses was practiced, when they should have thrown all caution to the wind and copied the 'children of the world' in forging new relationships. Given Wright believes Luke's Gospel was written *before* the destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 CE), he argues that Luke 16:9 refers to permanent new homes for people fleeing God's judgment upon Israel, and thus not to heavenly dwellings. This view has the strength of highlighting the urgency of facing up to crises and relating to Israel's wider story, but the weakness of seeming rather like a hermeneutical playdough machine churning out the same answers whatever the inserted text!

On the other hand, if we were to have a chat with Rachel Mann, she might invite us to consider whether the 'heart' of this parable is more concerned with the reality of living, as we do, in a compromised and complex world. We might argue God cannot be the master because he is depicted in such a 'worldly' manner, but perhaps the challenge is actually to avoid being 'holier than thou', and recognise that we're *all* caught up in unjust and unfair systems. This reading has the key strength of really asking us the hard question – is our loyalty actually to God or to mammon? It has the weakness of leaving us with some very difficult explaining to do about God, and the picture that we are given in the parable of a corrupt master.

Friends, whichever way we read this parable, Jesus isn't offering us sugar-coated escapism from the crises of our time. I wonder if we're in such a muddle as a nation at the moment because we've become so used to pursuing self-interest that the notion of seeking solutions to our problems which also benefit other people as well as ourselves is profoundly counterintuitive? Yet, whatever else we may say about the steward, he did alleviate the situation facing those in debt. What might it mean in the midst of the cost of living crisis facing us now if we turned away from the pursuit of mammon, and instead prioritised love of our neighbour? I'll leave you to ponder that thought. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Rachel Mann's *Spectres of God* reflects on human fragility, and the hope to be found in divine fragility.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing