

Waking up to crisis

The reflection shared by Rev Liz Crumlish

at our joint Harvest communion on 22 September 2019

Our Gospel reading was Luke 16:1-13 – The parable of the dishonest manager

One of the frustrating things about written communication is that it's often hard to grasp the tenor of a letter or an email or a text – even when we employ devices like emojis to give some kind of clue about whether we're being humorous or sarcastic or deadly serious.

Anyone scrolling through my texts or Facebook or Twitter conversations might form a very different opinion of me to the judgement they'd make from a face-to-face meeting – maybe!

There are lots of passages in the Gospels, especially those so-called red-letter passages that are full of Jesus' words, that I'd love to have be able to see Jesus' face as he spoke. I want to see that tilt of his head, the glint in his eye or the tongue in his cheek.

Jesus was a wind-up merchant. He saw right through the piety and the practices of those around him – and he called them out on it constantly and, while, when Jesus wanted to, he cut to the chase and took no prisoners, there were other times when, it seems, he enjoyed letting folk sift through his words, work things out; times when he allowed his message to sink in, bit by bit – because there was a lot, then and now, for folk to take in.

With this parable today, we are invited, not to gloss over it because it seems difficult, but to engage with it and discover how it might speak into our lives and into the life of the world we inhabit. Never, in any of Jesus' parables, are we allowed to be bystanders. We are always implicated.

So what are we to do with today's gospel? How might we allow it to speak into our lives here as we celebrate the signs of harvest all around us?



Well, in the absence of those facial expressions or body language or even emojis, one of the things we have to rely on is the context of Jesus' words as the Gospel writers located them.

Today's Gospel is placed between the Parable of the prodigal son and the Parable of the rich man and the poor man, Lazarus. Two parables either side of today's, about gifts that have been squandered, about opportunities that have been missed.

And in the parable we read today, about the dishonest manager, we're told that the charges brought against the manager were also charges of squandering – he was accused of squandering the rich man's property.

But it's not just property that has been squandered – relationships have been squandered too. Relationships have been squandered in all three of these parables – the prodigal son wrote off his family, the manager exploited those he did business with, and the rich man barely noticed the poor man at his gate.

Relationships are really important to Luke as he frames his Gospel. Throughout it there's an emphasis on relationship, particularly Jesus' relationships with





those he encountered. At every turn, Luke portrays Jesus as hanging out with those who were considered to be at the bottom of the heap, those deemed by others to be beyond the pale.

Jesus was the talk of the steamie – or the synagogue – because of the company he kept. The Pharisees in particular didn't like the company Jesus kept and constantly criticised him for it. And Luke, through his emphasis on relationships, gives us a glimpse into the social divisions of the day. There's also a whole economic divide highlighted by Luke in the parables he chooses to share. He shares stories of folk in positions of relative prosperity and status having to rely on those much further down the food chain to bale them out in their hour of need.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we find the guy beaten up on the road to Jericho desperate for help, any help, just grateful for anyone who won't pass him by – even a Samaritan.

In the story of the prodigal son, we find the son wishing that he could be as well off as the hired hands back at home, the ones he'd taken for granted all his life. And the prodigal's elder brother finds that he can't join the party until he makes friends with the prodigal.

In today's parable, the manager who lorded it over others, in his time of crisis sees those others as his way out of a life of penury. Maybe, just maybe, that's why he is commended. Because, when the chips are down, when we're backed into a corner, we are forced to get creative.

This man, in his hour of need, displays the same kind of desperation as the woman who had haemorrhaged for twelve years and worked up the courage to touch Jesus's cloak. He found the same kind of courage that Jacob found when he stayed

up all night to wrestle with God, in order to extract God's blessing. Desperate times call for desperate measures!

Today's Gospel shines a light on socio-economic, on political and on ethnic divisions that surrounded Jesus, with Jesus in the midst of all that, focusing on relationship and modelling for us a way of being in relationship with one another that is compassionate, that is restorative and that invites creativity.

Here, surprise, surprise, we have a Gospel that speaks right into our world today. This is a Gospel that invites us to approach the celebration of Harvest with compassion, with an eye to what is restorative and that invokes our creativity as we relate to all around us. This is a parable in which we are implicated as we wrestle with all of our socio-economic, our political and our ethnic divisions.

So let's, just for a moment, consider three of those divisions with which we wrestle today – let's talk about Brexit, let's talk about austerity measures, and let's talk about climate change.

Wherever you stand on the question of Brexit, we cannot deny that, in the name of Brexit, many have grasped an excuse to exclude and discriminate against others. And the categories of those whom we consider 'other' continue to grow, fuelled by the lies told and perpetrated in Brexit debates.

Whatever your political persuasion, no party seems able to address or redress years of austerity measures. And the gap between rich and poor becomes an ever-widening chasm.

Every weekend, we see our town and city centres filled with activists, protesting government policies and calling for justice for the citizens of the world, for those not yet born and for the earth itself. For the truth is that we're not simply dealing with the

economies of today, but with the deficits of the future, the things that, by the way we live and the choices we make, we are denying those who follow us into the future.

So what can we do? We who claim to live by a different rhythm, we who are influenced by a totally different set of economics, the economy of the Kingdom of God. How can we follow Jesus, modelling relationships that are compassionate, that are restorative and that are creative?

As we celebrate Harvest today, we're encouraged to confront those economies in which we operate and to assess the relationships we value. We're encouraged to question the ethics of where our food comes from and how it reaches our tables. We're encouraged to consider the conditions of those who labour. We're encouraged to call out sharp practice. We're encouraged to wake up to crisis today.

Because it is by waking up to crisis, like the dishonest manager, that we will find creative ways not to save the church, not even to save ourselves, but to listen and learn from those outside our normal circles; to listen and learn from those outside of our religious circles; to listen and learn from those outside of our social circles; to listen and learn from those we consider poor; to listen and learn from those we consider 'other'; to listen and learn how we might survive the crises that assail us – and not just survive but flourish, making it possible for all of creation to know and to share in the abundance that God promises and longs for us to know.

Waking up to crisis involves us re-evaluating our relationships. *Creativity* for us might come through listening to a 16-year-old Swedish schoolgirl who invites us to wake up to the crisis of climate change. *Transformation* might come from hanging out at the food bank, listening to the

stories of those whose benefits have been sanctioned with no safety net. *Restoration* might come from recognising that the economy of the Kingdom of God is so far removed from the economy in which the world operates.

Relationships matter much more than prosperity. And everyone counts. Instead of scarcity, there is abundance in God's kingdom. An abundance that transforms.

We are not bystanders. Jesus's parable implicates us. But the good news is that still God invites us to be co-creators. Still, God invites us to bring about transformation in our neighbourhood and in our world. Still God invites us to be involved in the restoration of individuals and of communities, locally and globally. Beginning first by listening to others, recognising how much we have to learn and receive from others, not just what we are able to give.

And, so, in this place, as we celebrate Harvest, as we take stock of the abundance and the ravages of the earth all around us, God invites us to be imaginative and creative in our relationships, with God, with one another and with the earth.

We are invited, with the God of the harvest, to wake up to the crises all around and to be courageously creative in seeking and in implementing how we might be shrewd managers of all of God's gifts today. For the glory of God. Amen.

The image was adapted from Bill Hood's blog at <https://tinyurl.com/y47jqoab>.

"... For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20 NRSVA)