

## Sunday 23 September: 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity “Flaws, faults and fallibility”

Readings: 1 Tim 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

*“If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”*

Along with all things furry and feathery, mountaintops and the voice of Jeremy Irons, opera is one of my passions. I can't explain what it is about that particular combination of music, words and theatrical spectacle that does it for me but it does – and for a few hours I find myself completely absorbed in the world and the story unfolding before me. At the top of my list is Mozart's “Marriage of Figaro”. Why? Well – the words of music critic Harold Schonberg say it for me:

*“It is a scintillating work with real people in it, and the music exposes them for what they are – lovable, vain, capricious, selfish, ambitious, forgiving, philandering. Human beings in short, all brought alive by the alchemy of a surprisingly inventive and sympathetic musical mind.”*

In Figaro the music of a fallible genius meets the words of a defrocked priest and together they transform the shrewd (and not so shrewd) machinations of servants and their masters, their loves, their lives, their triumphs, their disappointments into moments of extraordinary and indescribable beauty. Schonberg calls it alchemy. I think I'd describe rather differently. Somewhere for me in that curious mix of all too imperfect humanity lies a spark of the divine. Wagner's superheroes may make my pulse race, but it's the sheer depths of Mozart's humanity that touches my soul.

*“If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”*

My pulse didn't race when I first looked at this morning's Gospel reading. Standing here – a stone's throw (almost) from the Bank of England and the Stock Exchange - when the news has been dominated in recent days by financial uncertainty on the back of dodgy mortgages deals in the USA, it says something for God's sense of humour to find ourselves pondering the words:

*And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

The parable of the shrewd manager is one of the most puzzling of all those stories which Jesus told. Who's the hero and who's the villain? Is the shrewd manager an example we should copy or is his behaviour something “children of light” should avoid? Puzzling though this story may be as a model for Christian discipleship, the more I've tried to pray with and reflect on this passage in the past week, the more I've warmed to it; the more it's resonated for me with where I am.

Two things in particular have struck me. Firstly, like Mozart's Figaro, is the story's profound humanity, and how that ultimately holds within it the capacity to speak to us of God.

What we have in this story is the image of an all-too-human manager trying to make the best of a difficult situation. Faced with the stark reality of losing his livelihood, a strong survival instinct comes into play, alongside an awareness of his own limitations - “I'm not strong enough to dig and I'm ashamed to beg”. All he has left is the capacity to influence others by doing them a favour – “take your bill and make it fifty.” It may not be a heroic strategy but it is a shrewd one.

*“If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”*

I’ve been pondering how that statement reads when you substitute the words “imperfect humanity” for the words “dishonest wealth”. For most of us don’t occupy the land of superheroes. Most of us occupy the land of limited gifts and many faults. Most of us like Schonberg’s description of the characters in Figaro have our own peculiar mix of being lovable, vain, capricious, selfish, ambitious, forgiving – and even for all I know, with a bit of philandering thrown in! Most of us like the shrewd manager are driven by a variety of instincts of which survival and self preservation are fairly strong. Yet it’s in this apparently unpromising manifestation of imperfect humanity that we called to be faithful to image of God within. It’s in this school of flaws, faults and fallibility that we learn what it means to follow Christ faithfully and, in so doing to catch glimpses of the true riches in the most unexpected places. Bizarrely, it’s in the awareness of our humans limitations that we find the glorious possibilities of the divine.

*“If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”*

The second thing that has emerged for me from pondering this this parable and Jesus’ use of it, is how much it speaks of growing up – morally, spiritually, emotionally. It speaks of learning to use to our critical moral judgement in areas that are not black and white but in all those uncomfortable places that appear as varying shades of grey. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Jesus uses a story about money, riches, wealth, possessions to try to teach these lessons. Money - we can’t live without and yet we find it disturbingly difficult to live with it. It’s one of those uncomfortable grey areas for us, both as individual Christians and collectively as the church. But for me it’s part of “growing up” spiritually to try to engage with those areas where all my instincts tell me it’s easier to walk away.

Here at St Mary le Bow, at the heart of the city, if the church is to have any relevance, any voice, any incarnational presence, it has no choice but to engage with institutions where money and profit is the primary focus. Much of George’s ministry here centres around such engagement – acknowledging the realities while also raising the difficult questions both for the money-making institutions and for the church.

Fair-trade organisations have had to do their own growing up and make their own uncomfortable compromises if the issue is to evolve from being a fringe concern to one which is now relatively mainstream.

At St. Martin-in-the-Fields, we have our own such grey area in the often fruitful but sometimes uncomfortable relationship between the church and the business which contributes enormously to our financial sustainability. In my own role at St. Martin’s I regularly sit between the two. I often find myself thinking that on those days when both sides seem to think I’ve got it wrong, either by selling out or by taking by a stand, I’ve probably done as good a job as I can. I think I’ve begun to realise that the real growing up happens when we move beyond seeing such places of disturbingly uncomfortable compromise as a necessary evil and actually find in them the possibility of glimpsing the divine - even there.

*“If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”*

Today we come to the end of St Martin on Tour. Being on tour, living out of boxes, trying desperately to remember where things are and what to take with us, has not been perfect and yet

within it we've discovered all sorts of riches. The warm hospitality of our hosts and a new realisation of what it means to be a Christ centred and not a building centred community are just a couple of the riches that have emerged.

Next week we'll return to our renewed and restored church building. There's a lot still to do and the building will be far from perfect but it has within it the capacity to point us to God and to be a rich resource for us and the world which we are called to serve.

And we'll return still as a flawed and fallible community, as this curious mix of lovable, capricious, vain, forgiving and forgiven people – a people entrusted with these imperfect riches we call our humanity. We'll return giving thanks for all that we've learnt and all that we are, knowing that it's as much through our imperfections rather than in spite of them, we find the glimpses of the eternal riches which are our inheritance.

*“ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”*