

A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity<sup>i</sup>,  
12<sup>th</sup> August 2020, at Saint John's Church in Savannah

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*And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely. Luke 16:8*

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In the Old and New Testament, in the times of pattern and fulfilment, salvation has a beginning, a middle, and an end - a past, a present, and a future. In the Old Testament, its **beginning in the past** was Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt by the blood of the Lamb and the victory at the Red Sea – a pattern fulfilled in the New Testament in Christ's cross and resurrection, and the redemption from sin's bondage through faith in the gospel and baptism into Christ. **The end** for Israel was its entrance through the Jordan river into possession of the land of promise - a pattern of our future glory, in the resurrection of the body, to which we pass through the Jordan river of our death. **The middle** for Israel was its journey through the wilderness – a time of trial and tribulation, of testing and probation, and so it is also for Christians, in the present time of our passage through the wilderness of this world. What happens after we became Christians? what will we do with the grace we have received? how will our lives be changed by the gospel we have believed? To what use will we put our spiritual privileges? For salvation is not only past and future, but also present - something to be worked out in the decisions we make day by day - in present choices with eternal consequences – in the use we make of blessings both spiritual and material. To make those decisions requires wisdom, and today's lessons instruct us in the wisdom that helps and the folly that hurts us in our pilgrimage to God.

In today's epistle lesson, Paul shows us the folly that hurts, an example not to be followed, of Israel's in the wilderness, when many fell into the sins of idolatry, fornication, tempting Christ, and murmuring – the worship of false gods, sexual immorality, putting the Lord to the test, and grumbling. Israel had experienced deliverance from bondage by God – and in the manna and water from the rock it had the assurance of the Lord's presence and provision that we receive in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's

Supper; but instead of using those blessings to grow in faith with the God who had saved them – they lusted and whored after other nations’ gods; they lusted and whored after other men’s wives. instead of trusting the Lord’s loving care they put it to the test, rebelled against the conditions he had set for them, and instead of gratitude for his grace, they gave him grumbling. The privileges that should have brought them close to God they squandered; and instead of attaining to the land of promise, they died in the desert.

At the core of their ruinous disregard for God’s will was the vice of *presumption* – an unfounded self-assurance, a false sense of security that made them reckless. It’s what Paul warns us of also: *let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall*. If we think that the privileges of the gospel means that we can stay in God's grace while worshipping the false gods of lust and ambition, then we are on course for ruin. If we find it hard to believe that we could fall from grace, look to the example of Israel - *with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness*. The greatest dangers on the road to the promised land are not the things that happen to us – painful as they may be – but the things that we do, and that bring on ourselves. There is no deliverance from presumption except by way of repentance; but as to the things that may happen to us, the hardships of this world, Paul has a word of encouragement for those who serve God in grateful faith: *God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tested above that ye are able; but will with the testing also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it*. If we serve the Lord with the obedience of grateful faith, Paul assures us that God will help us endure those sufferings while they last, and open a *way* for us through them that leads to the promised land of everlasting glory.

Israel's history shows us the folly of presumption - a bad example to flee; but now in the gospel parable we see a bad example Jesus wants us to follow – and many Christians are confounded by it. The parable of the unjust steward, who cleverly defrauds his master to secure his own future, shocks many people – and if you get hung on this you will miss his point; for Jesus is not condoning his unscrupulous methods or selfish purposes – as it says very explicitly, *the Lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely*. It's the steward’s wisdom that he is commending, the practical wisdom of

discerning how to use the means at his disposal to achieve the end he desires. Jesus is challenging the children of light, Christians, to be as wise in their stewardship of their goods, as the children of this world, like the unjust steward, are in their stewardship of theirs - but with different motives and purposes. For in Christ we have received the free gift of his grace, that cancels all our debts, forgives all our sins, and delivers us from death and judgment; and because God has met all our needs, that changes us from anxious self-seeking to generous self-giving. As Jesus says, *Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness* [worldly wealth]; *that, when ye fail, or when it fails* [ESV], *they may receive you into everlasting habitations*. The worldly wisdom of the unjust steward is to use the money at his disposal for a short time, to make friends for himself who will last for a long time, who will receive him into their houses after he is fired. The wisdom of Christian, is to use the same earthly goods God has entrusted to our stewardship for a short time, to build relationships in the bond of love and charity that abides to all eternity, by using money, not in service of self, but in the service of our neighbours at need; with generosity befriending and helping those in need of friends.

How we use our blessings, both material and spiritual, determines our eternal destiny; and so we pray for wisdom to use them well to grow in faith and in love and charity, to set us forward on the right path that will bring us to the promised land, in *everlasting habitations*. God grant us the spirit of wisdom, as today's collect puts it, *to think and do always such things as are right: that we who cannot do anything that is good without him, may by him be enabled to live according to his will, through Christ our Lord.*

The Holy Eucharist is offered to the glory of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ; that we may discern those things which harm, and those which help, in our pilgrimage to God, not squandering the grace that is given us in reckless presumption, but in prudence and wisdom using the gifts we have received in the service of love, that when we fail, we may at the last be received into everlasting habitations

**OT passages alluded to: Exodus 32 (idolatry), Numbers 14 (grumbling); 21:4-7 (serpents), 25:1-9 (fornication).**

**1 Corinthians 10** Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; <sup>2</sup>and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; <sup>3</sup>and did all eat the same spiritual meat; <sup>4</sup>and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup>But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. **[Beginning of Sarum:]**<sup>6</sup> Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. <sup>7</sup>Neither be ye idolaters, as *were* some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. <sup>8</sup>Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. <sup>9</sup>Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. <sup>10</sup>Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. <sup>11</sup>Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. <sup>12</sup>Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. <sup>13</sup>There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God *is* faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear *it*.

**Luke 16** And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. <sup>2</sup>And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward. <sup>3</sup>Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. <sup>4</sup>I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. <sup>5</sup>So he called every one of his lord's debtors *unto him*, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord?<sup>6</sup> And he said, An hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty. <sup>7</sup>Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore. <sup>8</sup>And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.<sup>9</sup> And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.

**2 Peter 1** <sup>1</sup> Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ: <sup>2</sup> Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, <sup>3</sup> according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that *pertain* unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: <sup>4</sup> whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. <sup>5</sup> And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge;<sup>6</sup> and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; <sup>7</sup> and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. <sup>8</sup> For if these things be in you, and abound, they make *you that ye shall* neither *be* barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. <sup>10</sup> Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: <sup>11</sup> for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

**1 Timothy 6:17-19** <sup>17</sup> Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; <sup>18</sup> that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; <sup>19</sup> laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

**Tobit 4:7-11** <sup>7</sup> Give alms of thy substance; and when thou givest alms, let not thine eye be envious, neither turn thy face from any poor, and the face of God shall not be turned away from thee. <sup>8</sup> If thou hast abundance give alms accordingly: if thou have but a little, be not afraid to give according to that little: <sup>9</sup> For thou layest up a good treasure

for thyself against the day of necessity. <sup>10</sup> Because that alms do deliver from death, and suffereth not to come into darkness. <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> In the Sarum Use (also RM and Lutheran sacramentary), the Epistle was 1 Cor. 10.6-13, extended in 1549 to 10.1-13. The former portion, 10.1-4 (10.1-5 in RM and Lutheran) were read at end of Septuagesima epistle (1 Cor. 9.24-27; 10.1-4/5). Unfortunately, the revisers of the Canadian BCP of 1962, in a case of the fidgets seen elsewhere in the eucharistic lectionary, altered this to 1 Cor. 10.1-7, 12-17.

The corresponding gospel lesson is Luke 16.1-9 (Sarum/BCP 1549-1662; displaced in RM to Pentecost VIII=Trinity VII). In the Canadian BCP of 1962 this was extended to 16.1-10; but was replaced in US BCP 1928 by Luke 15.11-end, the parable of the prodigal son and his elder brother. Luke 16.1-9 is the parable of the unrighteous steward, in which the emphasis (by counter-example) is on the steward or manager's virtue of prudence – using the means at your disposal to attain the end you desire. The point is general, but also particularized, as the story itself suggests, to the stewardship of money, especially in the (debt?-) relief of the poor.