

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Nov 8th 2013

One of the links between the first reading and the Gospel is the concept of stewardship. The apostle Paul does not use that word in the passage from Romans but the idea is certainly there. A steward is a manager of another person's goods. The most important qualities for a steward are faithfulness and honesty. A steward must constantly remember that the treasures she oversees do not belong to her.

In the first reading the apostle writes to encourage the brothers and sisters in Rome. In this passage, he focuses entirely on what God has done through him. If you do not read the text through the eyes of a steward, it can sound like Paul is bragging. Notice, though, that everything in the text that could be labeled as boasting is Paul's way of pointing out that he is a mere steward and that the treasure all comes from God. The grace Paul has was given to him by God. Paul has reason to boast alright but only "in what pertains to God." In fact, he says, "For I will not dare to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me...." Jesus had accomplished some pretty impressive things through Paul – preaching the Gospel and establishing churches, not to mention a couple letters he wrote – but Paul attributes all of this to "the power of the Spirit of God." On a different occasion he asks a church that was quite into boasting about the treasures they had in Christ if they had anything that they did not receive. We are stewards. We cooperate with God in using the treasures that he gives us. We have nothing of our own to boast about. Everything we have has been given to us by God.

The Gospel passage is about a dishonest, unfaithful steward. He squanders his boss's property. He gets caught and is told to prepare to give a full account of his stewardship (something for those of us who have received the grace of God to think about). I love the response of this wag: "I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg." He does not want to work or beg; he is used to living off of the wealth of others. So, what does he do? He uses the time he has left to ingratiate himself to the people who owe his boss money. It is a good deal for them, they pay less and the promissory note is marked paid in full, and it is a good deal for him. He's losing his job anyway so why not get in good with someone else? Even though his boss knows that this steward is dishonest, he gives him his due: the man acted prudently. He squandered. He stole. He shafted his boss. But he's no dummy. He's the type who always lands on his feet. What is Jesus' point? The Quaker theologian, Elton Trueblood, wrote a book entitled the Humor of Christ and in it he suggests that Jesus was simply joking. The whole point of the passage is to be honest and it ends with the statement that you cannot serve both God and money. Although this is certainly possible, my take on the words of Jesus is different. I think that Jesus is admonishing believers to be prudent in doing everything possible to hold onto the real treasure. This wag is pulling every trick in the book to keep a cushy job. Surely we who have the treasures of God will work as hard and be as wise in holding onto the good stuff.

George Butterfield