

I was with an old work colleague a few weeks ago who is a millionaire. I worked with him for many years and he is now retired. He was asking me how Josh, my eldest boy was getting on in Uni. I told him how he is settling in, but I mentioned that I can't believe for the next number of years we as a family will be paying nearly £6,000 per year on student accommodation. The money we pay to a landlord is effectively going down the drain – I don't get any return for that – it's dead money, and many families just take the hit. The better answer would be to raise money and buy a small flat that could be shared by Josh's flat mates, and then sell it at the end of Josh's term, and at least I would have the mortgage being paid for by other parents, and I'd have an asset that should at least hold its value or maybe make a little bit of money. Anyway, my old work colleague was listening to all of this, and he told me that because he has so much money he has to move some of his savings from a bank account and invest it somewhere, as it will do very little at present where it is. A conversation then ensued which shocked me, that possibly if I was ever to consider buying a property in Aberdeen to use for Josh and some of his student friends, that effectively my old work colleague could become the lender and then I pay him back like I would do with a mortgage. He told me that way he gets to move his money, I pay him back with interest that would be better than the banks and everyone is happy. It was a very shrewd move by my friend which rather took me by surprise that people are thinking about how to move their money around for better return and maybe avoid other financial issues.

The story in our passage today is all about the shrewdness of a manager, and actually this is one of these parables of Jesus that doesn't quite make sense does it? Is it applauding misconduct or shrewdness? It's actually an area of scripture that a lot of preachers try to avoid because it's difficult. Think about it. In any business, what happens when an employee is determined to be dishonest, when evidence demonstrates that he has stolen from the company, or what if we hear of someone who is dodging having to pay tax? That person is immediately sacked, isn't he? Or a tax dodger may end up in prison. People like this are given notice to pack their belongings and then they're out the door. They're certainly not shown any recognition or commended for acting shrewdly. The parable just doesn't make any sense.

But it's important to say what this parable doesn't mean. It's not ok to be a con artist as long as you get away with it in the end, nor is it teaching us how to manipulate events for our own benefit. Jesus is not applauding the practice of the shrewd employee. But he is, like all parables, trying to weave a clever message out of a simple everyday story.

For me, it's verses 8 and 9 which give us some idea of what Jesus might be trying to get at. The Message Translation, which is a modern version produced by Eugene Peterson I think gets to the nub of the issue. Here's how these verses are translated, "Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behaviour."

Jesus is actually telling us to be shrewd, but in a righteous way for the kingdom. This passage is in essence asking us, the Church, the following question – How shrewd are we in speaking out the Christian faith? Are the people who belong to the light righteously outsmarting the people who belong to the world? Or are we just accepting that the world has won? Have we forgotten that if we are Jesus' disciples, then all the resources of heaven are available to us through God's Holy Spirit.

Now I realise that this interpretation might not be the most obvious tack. Am I really saying that Jesus wants us to be shrewd? I think I'm telling you that we need to think carefully and strategically about how the gospel message reaches a 21st century culture. The reality is that the days of just opening the doors on a Sunday morning and watching the crowds come in are gone. We've got to think smart in our evangelism. We've got to think out of the box.

To give you an example, people sometimes ask me why when we give away to the community why I never receive any financial donations, or why when I run Alpha why do I use a coffee shop rather than the church buildings. Well it's that shrewdness for the sake of the Gospel. The world always looks for what it can get back for what it puts in. The only thing I am interested in is the saving of souls, and it's my hope that as people see the generosity of the Church they see the generosity of God in welcoming them in.

The business of God's kingdom has been entrusted to us. When you think about it, that's a great privilege. Jesus considers us faithful and he entrusts his kingdom to us for which he shed his blood. To invest our wealth into God's kingdom means that we believe it is worthwhile. We believe the Good News message has the power to change hearts and lives. And then we are told to use whatever gifts the Lord has provided to ensure that this message is shared with others. Jesus wants us to call on the Spirit, to be passionate, to be creative in how we reach out to others. After all, people who are preoccupied with this world are very shrewd when it comes to business matters. They are passionate about their earthly future, and they act to provide for it. We too need to have the same creative passion for our eternal future.

It is no mistake today that people have many different skills – the clever bit is how they can use those skills all to bring others closer to God. Let's use every resource we have to reach out to a 21st century culture that might use its skills to make people more worldly, and yet we can be creative to use it to bring more souls to Christ. Amen.