

25th Sunday Year C

Fr Peter Groves

Amos 8

Luke 16.1-13

The verb to oppress is a dramatic one. Lovers of Monty Python will quickly recall the massed ranks of the People's Front of Judaea, all four of them, debating whether one of their members, a chap called Stan, has the right to have babies. Their leader's common sense response – but you can't have babies, Stan – is met by the reflex outrage of "Don't you oppress me", and when an emollient colleague suggests that such a right is symbolic of their struggle against oppression, Reg can't resist observing, that it is rather symbolic of Stan's struggle against reality. Having grown up on this kind of humour, it was something of a shock to discover, at theological college, that such people really

existed, and that hugely privileged middle class Christians were all too ready to embrace a narrative of oppression. Indeed, having come from Pusey House to the Cambridge Theological Federation, it was when someone espousing a rather trendier form of Christianity than mine actually uttered, in all seriousness, the words “Don’t oppress me”, that I realised I was not in Kansas anymore.

Genuine oppression is about as far from a joke as one could get. The scriptures overflow with righteous anger on behalf of those who are truly oppressed and, as followers of Jesus Christ we are called – straightforwardly and unequivocally – to take the side of the oppressed. This is rarely done, in my experience, by claiming for our fortunate selves a narrative of persecution while knowing little of its awful reality. What results is not so much solidarity as an insulting failure to listen,

still less to act. Whilst we are called to do what we can for to oppose oppression on a grand scale – persecution for reasons of faith, discrimination on grounds of gender, race or sexuality, the social and financial oppression which feeds and breeds poverty – we are also, and perhaps more immediately, required to ask ourselves about the ways in which oppression features in our own lives. And those ways are far more likely to cast us as oppressors, than as the oppressed.

The prophet Amos is characteristically forthright:

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? ... that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat?" The LORD has sworn by the

pride of Jacob: "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Amos was confronted by the experience of the ordinary people among whom he lived and worked as a shepherd. The injustices and oppression which they had endured left them ruined and starving. Those in power had to be held responsible, they had to be told the truth, to hear the word of the Lord. The danger for us is that we mimic their deafness at the micro level of our everyday existence. We oppress every time we put ourselves above or before the needs of another. And the frequency with which we do that makes our oppression not grand and dramatic, but alarmingly mundane.

Our gospel reading presents a particularly subtle tale of oppression and its inversion. A steward or manager is accused of wasting his master's goods, and has to give an account of himself. With the

inevitable dismissal hanging over his head, the manager laments his options. Manual labour is beyond his middle-class strength, begging is below his middle-class pride. He resolves to make himself welcome in the houses of many by reducing the bills of his master's debtors. To our astonishment, the master commends him for his actions.

The common interpretation of this parable – that the manager is simply writing off his own commission – doesn't quite get to the point. If we look in detail, we'll find that the sums involved are enormous: eight or nine hundred gallons of oil, the produce of around one hundred and fifty olive trees, produce which would cost upwards of one thousand denarii, tens of thousands of pounds in our terms. Likewise the wheat, worth over two thousand five hundred denarii. These are eye watering sums. Those who owe these

amounts are clearly not tenant farmers – no smallholder could dream of such quantities. And another detail is similarly revealing: the manager says to the debtors, take your bill and write. Those who owed the produce to the master could write, they were literate. Whoever they are, they are not Galilean peasant farmers.

So who are they? They must be wholesale merchants. This is a glimpse into first century agrarian economics. The rich man's lands produce massive quantities of wheat and olive oil, amounts which could only be sold in towns and cities far away. The debtors are merchants contracted to sell the master's harvest, and the manager's job is to handle the contracts, fixed in produce not in money so that the merchants couldn't simply up the price elsewhere. Having travelled to negotiate the contracts, the manager would return

to arrange safe passage for the goods. In reducing the bill the manager is increasing the merchant's profits, and making them his friends.

However, the most important people have yet to be mentioned. The merchants wouldn't deal with the master, and there is nothing in Roman or Jewish law to allow debtors or tenants to bring grievances against financial officials. Yet the master has heard rumours of the manager's misconduct. Who is doing the whispering? Those who actually work the land, the genuine peasants, the poor farm workers whose labour and effort are being exploited by these different groups of wealthy people. The equilibrium of owner, manager and trader is being upset by the protests of the workers who, having unreasonable demands placed on their labours by the contracts being negotiated, do the only thing they can: they get rid of

the manager. In renegotiating the figures, the manager is both making friends of the merchants and relieving the pressure on the workers.

So this parable, it seems, contains a rather unexpected message about those who lurk beneath the surface of visible power and profit. The manager's crisis is brought about because the seemingly powerless workers have come together to cause his dismissal. He, in his turn, responds prudently by making both them and his business partners happy. Only the absentee billionaire is finally caught out. No wonder that Jesus says that the manager is commended for his shrewdness, and no wonder that the implication he draws out is that those concerned with worldly things are more shrewd in worldly dealings than those whom he calls children of light.

Central to this story is an absence, the absence of those who are being oppressed. Whilst crucial to the narrative, they remain below the surface, unnoticed until we dig hard and take a very close look. There are obvious lessons here for us as we seek to oppose oppression. Not simply the lessons of asking ourselves hard questions about the excesses we enjoy, and the demand of the gospel to care for those more fortunate. We need also, and more urgently, to learn the lessons of our own oppression, to understand when a selfish act is in fact oppressive of a loved one, or when a careless remark results in hurt far greater than our thoughtlessness could have predicted. We are all, in other words, oppressors, and our lack of awareness makes that oppression all the more stark.

Jesus calls us to the shrewdness of the dishonest manager, because he calls us to

judge between right and wrong, to recognize the urgency of the gospel call to care for the other, to understand that that which is of God and that which is of neighbor are one and the same, and that neither of them is that which is of self. No servant can serve two masters.