

**Decisive Disaster Management**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year C**  
**Luke 16: 1-13**  
**19 September 2010**

In my Father's garage there was a long line of big plastic bottles, three or four deep, filled with drinking water, just in case. That was a precaution against the Y2K scare, when it was anticipated that a worldwide computer meltdown would knock out power and pumping stations.

Then there was the stack of facemasks he got in ahead of the swine flu pandemic. There were enough left over to issue his children with a generous supply. But of course we never got to use them.

Sometimes I wonder how Mum and Dad would have coped with recent events here in Quakeville. At one level I suspect they might have been relieved. The disaster they had feared all those years had finally happened, and they had survived. Now they could start worrying about something else.

Of course they might well have gone on to copy the example of those who have been sleeping in their clothes, with all their identity and insurance documents close at hand.

But the drawback with all these anticipate every eventuality preparations is that the crisis when it comes is almost always of a kind that we hadn't seen coming. As our People's Warden Max Willyams said to me apropos of all the planning for my time away from the parish – it's the eventuality that you hadn't thought of that often catches you out – and that of course is exactly what has happened.

It could be argued that the New Testament is one big disaster management manual. But while it includes shipwrecks, earthquakes and violent deaths in its story line it doesn't regard these traumatic events as the biggest concern we have to worry about. It is like a movie camera that pulls back to get a big picture perspective on the human story. Seen from this perspective there are only three events that really count for anything – the creation of the world by God – the sending of His Son into the world to draw it back to Himself – and the return of the Son in glory at the end to fulfil and complete the world of creatures.

Of course there is an inconvenient reality in the middle of these big three events – a world gone wrong, full of hurting, and foolishness, and selfishness, and cruelty. But God has the matter in hand. Those last two events will take care of all that. The final outcome can't be in doubt. But we need to opt in to this assured future.

When we hear the story of the dishonest manager we can be tempted to interpret it as a South Canterbury Finance parable, a stern warning on the subject of unusual business ethics. But I doubt if any sensible or normal CEO would respond the way that rich man did to the wily stratagems and outrageous skulduggery of his overseer. I assume that what is being talked about here is the way God weighs up and assesses whether his servants have behaved in a profitable or unprofitable manner.

The event that triggers the story line is the manager being called to account for his stewardship of the boss's assets. It is, if you like, a spot audit, or to put it in New Testament terminology "a visitation," the return of the Master on his final mission to sort

things out, and to settle accounts. Only this isn't an accountancy story. It is about the end of the world as we know it, and about what we might do given our awareness of the short time available to us to do what is required to deal with the situation.

The world as we know it has a curious double-edged quality to it. On the one hand it is beautiful, full of promise and hope and bountiful good things. But it is also fragile and thwarted, abounding in dangers, perils and tragedies. So, often life doesn't turn out the way we expected or hoped.

The New Testament is utterly realistic about this world of disappointments and defeats. It views with unflinching clarity the doomed and dying nature of our world in all its diminishing energy and short-lived pleasures. To attach ourselves to the cheap thrills and false promises of this fading order would be to risk going down with the ship.

But planted in the midst of this winding down world is the vibrant, effervescent, enrapturing presence of the Christ event. This unstoppable energy source of irradiating being is growing through and beyond the outward events of our Shadowlands existence. And sooner than we might think it is going to blow the whistle on the passing parade of events, and as in a game of musical chairs we will end up racing for the nearest available seat. From this end time perspective only one thing will matter – whether we are with or without the presence of Christ. Because the only life that really is life is that quality of abundant being that comes about through continual contact with the very source of life itself. Everything else will drop away at this point to be revealed as the counterfeit it really is.

This then is the perspective, the backdrop, and the back-story on the extraordinary actions of the dishonest manager. Seeing that the time is short, that the game of life as we know it is almost over, he takes decisive action to make sure that he will be living in what the Jerusalem Bible calls “the tents of eternity.”

G B Caird in a telling phrase writes that, “Where there is money there is menace.” Money is both an energy source that makes things happen in our world, that gives us choices, and it is also a bulwark by which we try to gain security and to insulate ourselves off against setbacks and calamities. The manager accurately saw that money wasn’t going to obtain any of those outcomes in the emergency situation that he saw himself in. But by the imaginative and generous use of it he might win friends and influence people in such a way as to be on the right side of the ledger in the final reckoning of things. By behaving like the God whose instinctive nature is to give himself away to the utmost degree, as he showed on the cross, the manager would find himself rising to new life in a new world in the company of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In 1875 the passenger ship *the Deutschland* sailed from Bremerhaven, and was wrecked in a storm on the English coast, with some of the passengers clinging to the deck and the rigging for hours before they were finally flung in to the sea. Amongst the drowned were a company of Franciscan nuns fleeing Bismarck’s campaign against the Catholic Church. When asked for a poem on the subject Gerard Manly Hopkins came up with the extraordinary *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. In his perspective on the story as the ship sails out of port and snow begins to fall

on the masts and rigging it is as though *the Deutschland* is sailing in to eternity, its destination is the life of the world to come, and it is making its final journey from one world in to the next. What matters now, the way in which the behaviour of the passengers and crew will be assessed, is not what they will do to try and survive, but how they will point to and open themselves up to the life that really is life in the manner of their dying. Everybody dies the first death of the end of our biological life. At issue is whether we will die the second death, a spiritual death of being deprived forever of the presence of Christ. This is the only thing to be really afraid of. The New Testament is the disaster management manual that tells us how to avoid that. Without ever having read it that resourceful Galilean manager know what to do about this situation, and decisively did it.