

**SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 25C**  
**FATHER JORDAN GREATBATCH**

The Reverend Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy was an English Anglican priest and poet. He was also a chaplain to the forces in the First World War. There's a story of him going through the trenches in a line of soldiers. As they waded through the mud Studdert-Kennedy slipped and fell on the man in front. There was much grumbling and someone in front called back "Who's that". Studdert-Kennedy replied "It's the Church". From the front again. "What on earth is the Church doing here?" A good question indeed.

"What's the Church doing here?" Of course, for Studdert-Kennedy it was imperative that the Church was where the people in need were. That's why he went to the front. It's a question which is still relevant today.

The Church is facing a lot of challenges.

Rural churches are facing pressure, and the church is increasingly marginalised in public life. The media and others don't seem to care or want to listen to the church for a variety of reasons. But that doesn't mean we don't carry on and try and make our voices clear.

The Reverend Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy was famous for his advocacy for the working classes. We see this most vividly in the Old Testaments prophets such as Amos that we have encountered this morning. These prophets had the courage to speak to those in power and influence by the very fact that they were both in society but also outside it. These prophets often came from the lower parts of society and saw the oppression first hand.

And then we have Today's Gospel. Where we hear Jesus' confronting and if we admit it at first sight, rather confusing words. For I have to admit that when one first approaches this Gospel text it seems there are a lot of inconsistencies in it and the message does not seem very clear. For example, why should Jesus commend a dishonest manager?

It is important to keep in mind that the manager was not commended for his dishonesty. Jesus commends him for his astuteness, his shrewdness. There is a difference. This manager saw his job coming to an end so he made friends with some of his master's debtors by letting them off part of the debt. When the manager was out of a job, he thought these people would help him out, because he had helped them out. This was an important part of ancient culture. What we might call bribing, or buying influence was an accepted part of relationship building. You do me a favor, and I owe you a favor.

The rich man was most probably an absentee landlord. The steward was usually a slave born in the household and possessed great authority and full responsibility. Like the tax collector, the steward must show a profit for his master, but he could also procure personal benefits by means of skilful loans and extravagant interest. The legal system presupposed by this parable is a widely attested one and is contrary to the Old Testament ban of usury. The steward was authorized to make binding contracts for his master. The usurious interest would not be listed separately in the contract, but would be included in the one lump sum mentioned in the contract. Fifty bushels of wheat at 100% interest would be shown as a debt of 100 bushels in the contract.

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So, I think that what Jesus was getting his hearers to engage with was the fact that the master commended the manager for staying in relationship with those who were his debtors. He was wise in his dealings. The manager did not put himself off side with others, but kept in relationship with them. Being friends with another suggests some sense of equality, some mutual understanding. Jesus told his disciples they are to be just as astute in dealing with the highest goal, the proclamation of the gospel.

Increasingly, as societies we are becoming more politically divided. You just have to look at the reaction to the murder of Charlie Kirk, a right-wing political activist in the United States last week. This type of political violence doesn't come out of nowhere. It is a symptom of when we stop to talk to each other and treat those we disagree with as evil. And we are seeing this on both sides of the political spectrum, as the rhetoric ramps up and the division grows.

As a Christian community we have a responsibility to remain in relationship with those whom we disagree with, not matter how much we might disagree. And use these relationships for the good of the Kingdom.

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Jesus therefore invites us to consider where our friendships lie. How can we stay in relationship with one another? These questions may apply to us as individuals, a community, a nation or they may apply globally. Staying in relationship can still allow for justice, but may not allow for indiscriminate retaliation. So in our dealings with each other, and as nations deal with each other, the question remains the same. How can we remain in a relationship of mutuality and respect and yet also be wise? Not an easy to achieve, but a constant ideal to which we work. As we work for that ideal of relationship, we in fact become more like God, who is unity within himself, and draws us into that unity.

Therefore the steward in our parable today represents the enthusiastic response which people of this age show in their dealings with one another and contrasts sharply with the lacklustre response of the disciples to Jesus' kingdom. When are we also guilty of the same?

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It is more important than ever to keep coming back to the Gospel imperative of humble relationships guided by love and understanding.

The questions we need to keep asking, both for our selves and for the world, are questions like these:

How does what we are saying about God match the God about whom Jesus spoke? Do our actions reflect something of the actions of Jesus who proclaims God in his actions?

Does what we do and say help to build the kingdom of God on earth, which after all was the primary mission of Jesus whom we say we follow?

If the Church is to survive, we must be wise and shrewd. As Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel we must be 'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.' We must be continually working on our

relationships with each other, our communities and the wider world. We want people to ask, as they did Studdert Kennedy, what is the Church doing here? For only through this engagement will we be able to proclaim our faith and maintain the hope we share, that in Jesus, God reveals to us his desire to be with his people, to heal our divisions and to enable us to flourish in our relationships with him and each other and let his Kingdom come.