

This weekend, the gospel narrates one of the most puzzling parables Jesus ever told, the Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Lk 16:1-12). The whole parable is baffling, not least because Jesus – and not for the first or only time – is using a kind of ‘topsy-turvy logic’. It’s the kind you can find in *Alice in Wonderland*: Alice is constantly running but remains in the same spot:

“Well, in our country,” said Alice, still panting a little, you’d generally get to somewhere else – if you run very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.”

“What a slow sort of country!” said the Red Queen. “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

Lewis Carroll – or Charles Ludwig Dodgson, to give him his proper name – was a mathematician and a logician, so he knew what he was doing when he wrote that.

Topsy-turvy logic is when something doesn’t make sense in our heads: how can a thief be praised by the master he cheated? But something that doesn’t make sense to the head can be understood by the heart – and Jesus’ teachings were always addressed to the heart. They were also sometimes very quirky – as in the case of the Dishonest Steward.

In *A Hitch-Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams does the same thing visually, when he writes about a fleet of spaceships coming to attack the earth:

“The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t.”

In another parable, the Unjust Judge, who won’t give a poor widow her justice, Jesus uses the same technique two thousand years before Douglas Adams. He is saying: God is much the same way as the Unjust Judge *isn’t*.

Familiarity with the parables means that we don’t really think about them too much; we hear, but oftentimes we don’t listen. If we *did* think and *did* listen, we would probably realise that the parables frequently zig when they’re supposed to zag.

Another symptom of familiarity with the parables is our feeling confident that we know what they mean. As soon as the parable begins, we know how it’s going to end, and we tear ahead in fourth gear to the moral; but this is the wrong way to go about things, because Jesus himself says he taught in parables so that his listeners *should not* immediately understand them. To understand, they would to think about them, not just hear them. We are meant to ruminate on the meaning of the parables.

In today’s Dishonest Steward story, Jesus is not of course encouraging us to rob or swindle people; on the other hand, he *is* telling us to use the things of this passing world – such as money – to our eternal advantage. And he adds the reason why: “Because the children of this world are more astute at dealing with their own kind than are the children of light.” This is linked with what he says in Matthew (10.:16), one of my

favourite gospel sayings: “Be as gentle as doves and as cunning as snakes” (Matt 10:16).

In both cases, Jesus makes a distinction between the darkness of the kingdoms of this world and the light of the kingdom of truth. While we live in this world – to which we do not ultimately belong – we must do so innocently yet cunningly, shrewdly... and we should use the things of this world, whatever they may be, to build up treasure in the next. If this means buying a ‘Big Issue’ from someone who’s chatting on a hands-free smartphone – so be it: we may give them a couple of pounds, but without knowing us, they get us another chandelier in our heavenly mansion.