



Homily - Annual Mass at Saint Charles Seminary

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**St Charles Seminary, Guildford
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At first glance the parable of the dishonest steward to which we have just listened seems to be a strange one to be coming from the lips of Jesus. When the steward's dishonesty comes to the attention of his master, and his master informs him that he is to be dismissed, the steward immediately takes steps to ingratiate himself with others so that, if he falls on hard times, he can call on them to repay his favour to them. It is true that in the parable the master praises his steward not for his dishonesty but for his astuteness, his cleverness, in looking after himself in the face of his dismissal. It is also true, however, that the master does not criticise the steward for cheating him out of his rightful property. It would be easy to read this parable as a tick of approval on the part of Jesus to the principle that the end justifies the means.

Perhaps it is only when we read tonight's gospel in conjunction with the next parable Jesus tells, the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, that we can really understand what Jesus is trying to teach us. It seems to me that the real point lies in the difference between the actions which the steward takes and the actions which the rich man takes or, in the case of the rich man, fails to take.

The steward, we might say, has his wits about him. He recognises the situation which confronts him and takes decisive action. The rich man, on the other hand, seems to go about his business with his eyes closed to the realities around him. He does not even notice the poor beggar, Lazarus, who sits at the gate of the rich man's property, begging for help.

Reflecting on this we might recall a phrase that Jesus uses on another occasion. Saint Matthew's gospel tells us that when the Scribes and Pharisees once asked Jesus for a sign from heaven he replied in this way: *"When evening comes you say, 'It will be fair weather for the sky is red' and then, in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy for the sky is red and overcast'. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky but you cannot interpret the signs of the times"* (Matt16:1-4).

If we see in tonight's Gospel an invitation from Jesus to keep our eyes and ears open, and indeed even more importantly to keep our heart open, to the realities of the world around us and to the opportunities and challenges of each day, then we will realise that tonight's Gospel has a powerful message for people who are discerning a call to the priesthood. The Lord does not want anyone to stumble into the priesthood, or drift into the priesthood, only to discover, when it is really too late, that he had not really discerned carefully, wisely, courageously, and honestly whether or not the Lord had given him all that was needed to be an effective minister of the gospel and a true and compassionate image of Jesus as the good Shepherd and the humble servant of his people. Nor, of course, does the Lord want anyone to act dishonestly by complying externally with the requirements of formation but not really committing himself to them



with his whole heart. The dishonest steward in tonight's gospel did, in fact, recognise the reality of his situation and he also acted boldly to address that situation. The rich man in the other parable walked past the beggar at his gate day after day and never even saw him. The rich man missed a precious opportunity to take an important step, in compassion and with courage, and only realised too late the mistake he had made.

For most of my priestly life before becoming a bishop I was involved in the academic, spiritual, pastoral and human formation of young men preparing for the priesthood. I have also been a parish priest, the director of a Salesian retreat centre, and a teacher and religious education coordinator in Catholic schools. What I have come to realise over thirty-five years as an ordained minister in the Lord's Church is that a vocation to the priesthood is a call from the Lord to reproduce in my life and in my ministry the pattern of the Lord's own way of being with people, and speaking to people, and sharing life with people, listening to them and accompanying them on their often confused and winding journey of faith. And, of course, I try to do this, as we all must, as a man who is himself on his own often confused and winding journey of faith.

I have also learnt that priests, in a special way, are called to remember and live by the Lord's insistence that he did not come to break the crushed reed or to quench the smouldering flame (cf. Matt12:20). Rather, he came to encounter the lonely, the confused and the broken not with condemnation but with gentleness, compassion and patience. In discerning a call to the priesthood here is an essential question: do I detect in myself the capacity to be a true reflection of the compassionate, non-condemnatory, endlessly patient Jesus whose ministry I wish to share? And because none of us will ever be perfect images of the Good Shepherd perhaps the even more important discernment question is this: do I detect in myself both a desire and a capacity to grow, under God's grace, into this kind of person? And behind this question is yet another one posed by tonight's gospel: am I honest enough and astute enough, and perhaps humble enough, to recognise the need to take decisive action and give God room to shape me as he wants, or am I in danger of staying on the surface of my formation journey, missing the real opportunities the Lord is offering me, just as the rich man missed his many chances to see Lazarus and do something for him?

The life of a priest is a challenging one and is not for the faint-hearted. The words of Saint John Bosco's mother to her son on the day of his ordination - *John, to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer* - will be as true for us as they were for Don Bosco. If our vocation is genuine the suffering will never reach into us as deeply as the joy of our priestly life and ministry. But if we have not done the hard work of formation which, of course, must continue after our ordination, then the suffering will distort us and diminish us. I have seen this happen often and I would not wish it on any of you - and nor would I wish to inflict such a person on God's holy people.

Look deeply into yourselves. Recognise with joy and gratitude the gifts which God has given you and use them to the full. Listen carefully to those who, both here in the seminary and on your pastoral placements have been entrusted with your formation, even and perhaps especially when what they say makes you uncomfortable. And most of all, pattern yourselves on the Good Shepherd whose living images all priests in the Church are called and ordained to be - and trust in God and in his love for you.