

# Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Bishop Richard – Sermon  
Licensing of Rev John Wilson  
19<sup>th</sup> September 2010



## Liverpool Parish Church

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### Luke 16: 1-13

When someone is sacked from a high-powered or sensitive job, it is often without notice with the added indignity of discovering that, on turning up from work, they are suddenly *persona non grata*.

They are not allowed into the building, not allowed to talk to their colleagues – however close or longstanding – and they are certainly not allowed near their desk. (I am not intending to be prophetic, let me add hastily).

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a story about a manager who was sacked – but who managed to get back to his desk. This man was lazy – so it was hardly a “bad luck” story – so lazy, in fact that those working under turned whistle-blowers because they were so concerned that business was leaching away. So they told the owner, who sent for the Manager and sacked him.

“Bring me the books immediately” said the owner to the manager “I want to see for myself what's been going on.” With nothing to cushion his fall, the Manager had to think fast. Before he took the books to his boss and before word of his dismissal could spread, the manager visited the biggest clients. He asked each one how much was owed, then implied that the owner had decided to reduce the debt. He invited each debtor to alter the figures in his own hand. This meant that the manager could not be charged with fraud, since he himself had not altered any figures.

Naturally, the debtors were delighted with this unexpected discount which the manager had negotiated on their behalf with the owner. Or so they thought. By the time the owner discovered what had happened, the whole community was probably in the middle of a wonderful party at which they toasted both the clever manager, who had worked so hard on their behalf, and the generous owner.

The owner was faced with the prospect of being a party-pooper as well as destroying his newly-found reputation for generosity if he were to insist that the full amount be paid. So the manager was saved. Because even if his dismissal still stood, the debtors were now obligated to him. They were so grateful to him for his actions on their behalf, they would surely make certain that he was well-supported.

Jesus commends the Manager not for his laziness, nor for his dishonesty but for his quick-wittedness and his willingness to risk everything. The Manager knew the personality of the owner. He knew the owner was generous and caring and just and he risked his life on that assessment being correct. And so it was that he neatly turned the tables on the owner, outwitted him and won a reprieve.

God, too, is a just and generous and caring God. This story, following as it does in Luke's Gospel the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son, suggest that there is always forgiveness. We can therefore risk everything and throw ourselves on God's mercy, no matter how little we deserve that mercy.

What underlines the story, however, is the urgency of acting speedily when the situation requires it. This presupposes we recognise the reality of what is facing us. Sometimes, especially in the life of the Church, we can lull ourselves into a false sense of security of believing that we don't have to act, or to change, because we play a “long game”. Parish ministry can seem a very steady sort of trade to ply – but complacency is a great enemy. These are challenging times.

Critical times require critical actions. Jesus is saying that the urgency of the coming of God's kingdom into the world requires us to take similar drastic steps if we are to learn how to welcome God. Fr John brings many gifts and the happy knack of putting them into practice. The proper response to our gospel is to let him get on with it and to take risks. Playing safe is not what I seek of him and I hope you will not try to trap him into some past pattern of ministry or some pre-conceived notion of how he should be your priest. Nostalgia is a very disabling affliction!

These are difficult times. We live in a post-Christian age and the gentle attrition of decline has afflicted all our churches for the best part of a century. But we must remember that the veneer of Christianity was often very thin. So we must never despair of ourselves or of our Church. However, as we grapple with the demands of changing patterns of ministry, we have to ask searching and urgent questions about the sort of Christian communities we want to promote.

What sort of life is being lived? Is there energy, vision and risk? Is there a sense of urgency? If not, we shall all be clearing our desks sooner than we might have imagined.

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