

Last Sunday afternoon a number of us were in the park helping Henri and Caroline celebrate their 60<sup>th</sup> birthday – when the band played ‘living on a prayer’ and we all join into sing.

I was struck by the fact that a Bon Jovi song with strong links to the Union and social justice Movement, and the hardship of many labourers has so infiltrated into our culture that as soon as it is played, in many countries – with many histories – the crowd of a certain age will all join in.

The verse of this song begins by outlining that the wharf-ies are on strike – and at the end of another week of pickets his wife is the only one to bring a small wage into the house

*She says, we've got to hold on to what we've got  
It doesn't make a difference if we make it or not  
We've got each other and that's a lot for love  
We'll give it a shot*

*Woah, we're half way there  
Woah, livin' on a prayer  
Take my hand, we'll make it I swear  
Woah, livin' on a prayer<sup>1</sup>*

The next verse describes another situation and hardship – and then the chorus returns. Regardless of whether Bon Jovi is your type of music or not – the lyrics of this song are timeless – the belief that we can make it if we have each other – we can survive – and as such we are living on the hope of a prayer.

It struck me that a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party the singing of this verse was louder than even happy birthday!! Now maybe it is because it is a song of many of our youths – or that it is just a good sing-a-long. But I think too it is that at some level it resonates.

As people of faith of course we should always be living on prayer – this should be the anchor and hope of our life – but is it – and how is it?

Do we only pray when we are in trouble? Do we only pray when things are good? Do we lament with God and talk with God about what we are struggling over or do we edit our prayers to God?

In the reading we hear from the prophet Jeremiah today we hear a man who is struck by grief – by the pain of what he sees unfolding in his nation. Earlier in chapter 8, Jeremiah demands that the people of Judah look at the wounds of their entire nation. They must stop pretending that nothing is wrong, stop ignoring the voices of the wounded and oppressed, stop silencing those who testify to the wrongs

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.google.co.uk/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=lyrics%20-%20living%20on%20a%20prayer%E2%80%99>

that have been done them. And to political and religious leaders, Jeremiah tells them to stop claiming they have the magic words or the special liturgies that will make everything better. They do not (Jeremiah 8:11)<sup>2</sup>. People want Justice!

Some within Jeremiah are searching for God and not finding her. Some voice their hopelessness and frustration. All of them are asking questions, and so is Jeremiah. And so he addresses his confusion and frustration – his lament to God. Too often as Christians, we edit our prayers to God. We speak frankly to friends, advisors, and paid professionals, but we don't speak frankly to God. Jeremiah holds nothing back from God and models a prayer life of both praise and lament.<sup>3</sup>

This lament should not draw us down, but rather like the Bon Jovi lyrics offers a strength, and a solidarity. We are not on our own – if we live on our prayer we express to God both our joy and our pain – and we listen to for God's joy and pain and we live in this dialogue. We express the nature and experience of our situation and we seek to find God within it; so that God's justice might reign.

Jeremiah is seeking to shake the community of Judah out of its complacency. Jeremiah can see this catastrophe coming. We see his mood becoming more and more desperate. Jeremiah challenges the community – and us too – to look at what is before and pray for a new way – and also work for that new way.

This too is one of the points of Jesus parable about the dishonest manager. Here we see someone shaken free of complacency. As so often happens in the parables, disciples' conventional morality is challenged by the necessity of the circumstances. Drastic times call for drastic measures. Jesus offers us the example of someone who can at least hear and respond. How do we bring about economic justice?

The Dishonest Manager is a parable that shakes us, not only because it is not pretty – but also because it is uncomfortable – it is so often used as an example of the choice we have between God and Mammon – and is quite often the parable used on stewardship Sundays – we cannot serve God and Money – the natural conclusion being then that we should give generously to the church. Now on a Sunday like today, when we will spend the rest of the day after church in Queens Park selling our wares as part of Queens Park Day – this message is even more confronting – how can we sell and focus on selling on the Lord's Day?

Well part of this answer is – we need the money to support our work and mission here – but as always the answer is more complex than this – we too need to step out of complacency that we know the answer to the question about this choice – and also that the Church will always have enough to survive. We won't! And sadly as much as we might want to say money is a problem of the world – it is also the challenge of the church as we try to impact on our community – and that impact takes money.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2974](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2974)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1771](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1771)

But this parable is not really about money per se – this parable is about exploitation. To try to understand this parable (Luke 16:1-8a) and the attached sayings (verses 8b-13) in the context of Luke's narrative world, we need a mini-course on the economics of Roman-occupied Galilee in the first century. Rich landlords and rulers were loan-sharks, using exorbitant interest rates to amass more land and to disinherit peasants of their family land, in direct violation of biblical covenantal law. We sometimes forget that charging interest on loans was forbidden in the Bible because it exploited the vulnerable poor<sup>4</sup>.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' ministry invokes the biblical concept of Jubilee and debt forgiveness.

So the complacency we are invited out of, is not so much about the need of money, or even the raising of it – but of its use. How are we challenged to notice those who are exploited by money and greed? How do we hear the pain of those in the Bon Jovi song who really are having to live on a prayer as there is not money to pay the rent or buy food?

Every week Laurence's Larder whom we support feeds over 100 people who are living on a pray. People who are homeless or who have so little that after they pay rent and taxes they have no money for food. But it is not just about wealth – it also feeds those who are lonely – those who live with illness or are alone in society who may have enough to buy food but accept for meals at a soup kitchen would always eat alone.

If we follow Jeremiah's pattern we lament this with God and we work to make it different. We use our pray as action to bring about change in society that is needed. But we also have courage to live on a prayer – or rather to live in and on faith.

And to do this – we need sometimes work on the Lord's Day to bring about glory to God and to allow others to see the hope that we have; and work for justice within this community and beyond.

Perhaps then one key to parable of the Dishonest Manager is to remember that we are placed on this earth to love and care for each other, not to separate ourselves from each other with wealth, status, or privilege. It is said that St. Augustine asserted that God gave us people to love and things to use, and original sin manifests itself in our penchant to confuse those two, loving things and using people<sup>5</sup>.

It would seem then that what Jeremiah and Luke's Jesus call us too is honest prayer that loves and works for change; and justice for all.

And in all that we do on this day – may this be at our heart.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2982](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2982)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-18-c-wealth-and-relationships/>

*17<sup>th</sup> after Trinity – 18<sup>th</sup> September 2016*  
*Jeremiah 8: 18-9:1; 1 Timothy 2: 1-7 and Luke 16: 1-13*