

Common sense as well as devotion are needed for the service of God. Someone once said common sense is not so common! God has given us minds to think and to act accordingly and many a time we fail to think through things and make decisions in an emotional or an impulsive manner. We see something that seems just right and we jump into it headlong without waiting to evaluate what we are doing and what the consequences will be. God's guidance on many occasions is basically 'sanctified common sense'. We commit our decisions into God's hands as we pray for his help and direction and then we are asked to use our ability to think to make that decision. The Holy Spirit then sanctifies our thinking process and enables us to make decisions which will bring glory and honour to God.

Jesus teaches about this theme by telling a parable about a dishonest steward who showed commonsense, foresight and also insight into his Master's character. The dishonest steward discovers that his master expects obedience and judges those who fail him. He also discovers the extraordinary mercy of his master. He decides to risk everything on the unqualified mercy of his master. He knows that if he fails he goes to jail; if he succeeds, he is saved. This parable is one of the most difficult parables. The parable brings before us a new Jesus who apparently seems to be compromising with evil. He approves of a dishonest steward's shrewd plans to save his skin, and recommends that cleverness to his disciples. He also says, 'I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.'

The master of the steward has been hearing about the misdemeanours of his steward for quite some time and asks him to settle accounts and that he cannot be his manager any longer. The servant on the other hand is a shrewd man. He is not sure how much his master is aware of and therefore chooses to be silent. The Master's ultimatum needs to be looked at closely. Has he fired him now or is it going to be fired later? The steward behaves as though the firing is not immediate. In fact he says that my master is taking the stewardship away from me and when I am put out of the job I will have nothing to fall back on. Whereas the master clearly indicates that he is fired. 'You are no longer able' indicates that the servant has been fired on the spot.

The servant has also discovered about the mercy of his master because though he was fired he was not jailed. The servant knows his master is one who expects obedience and acts in judgement and also a master who shows unusual mercy and generosity even to a dishonest steward. The Steward then calls the debtors one by one making sure that the debtors do not consult among themselves as to what is happening. Each one of them is called as though they were the only ones who were getting a special dispensation from the Master. So he calls the first debtor and reduces his debt of 100 measures of oil (about 900 litres) to 50 measures reducing it by 50%. He calls another and reduces his debt of a 100 measures of wheat to eighty. The steward unilaterally reduces the amounts owed so that the people will give credit to the master. The steward then finishes his daring plan by gathering up the freshly changed accounts and delivers them to his master.

The master looks at it and knows immediately that the amounts have been fudged. But what are his options. The word had already got around to the village that this rich man was such a noble man who on his own had called them and reduced their debts. There was a great round of celebration in praise of him, the master, as the noblest man that ever rented land in their village. He was left with two options. Firstly, he could go back to the debtors and say that it was all a mistake and that the steward had been dismissed and so his actions were null and void. But if he did this then the villagers' joy would turn to anger and he would be cursed for his stinginess. The second option was to keep quiet and accept the praise that is being showered on him and allow the steward to ride high on the wave of popular enthusiasm. The master is a generous man. He did not jail the steward in the first instance. He reflects and turns to the steward and says 'You are a very wise fellow'.

The commendation of the dishonest steward has always been difficult to cope with. How would Jesus use a dishonest man as an example and ask the children of light to learn from and be wise as him. The cleverness and skill deployed in self preservation is being praised. He is praised for his wisdom. He is sensitive to the hopelessness of his situation. He is aware of the one source of salvation, namely the generosity of his master. God the Master is a God of judgement and mercy. Because of the Steward's dishonesty he is caught in the crisis of the coming of the kingdom. He has to do something. Excuses will avail the steward nothing. Man's only option is to entrust everything to the unfailing mercy of his generous master who, he can be confident, will accept to pay the price for man's salvation. The clever rascal was wise enough to place his total trust in the quality of mercy experienced at the beginning of the story. That truth was vindicated. We as his disciples also need the same kind of wisdom and be prepared for the Lord's coming.