



Awake to Serve

KATHLEEN RUSHTON tells how the parable of the serving master (Luke 12:32-48) can influence our responses to injustices in our world.

The gospel of Luke was written 50-55 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The risen Jesus was expected to return. But he had not! A long section of Luke (11:14-14:35) which jars with and often offends today's readers addresses the question of how to live and make sense of this "in-between" time. Jesus is sharp and confronting – but there is more to it than this.

"On the way to Jerusalem"

In Luke 9:31, Jesus talked about his *exodus* – his departure. He "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). Until he arrived there, we are told repeatedly that he is "on the way"; in the countryside, passing through villages and towns, "on the way to Jerusalem".



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Jesus spoke the word of God to three different groups "on the way". To the crowds, he gave warnings and called them to conversion. To his disciples, he gave encouraging instructions. And to the Pharisees and lawyers who opposed and resisted him, he spoke mainly in parables of resistance.

Our reading has three parts. In the first part (Lk 12:32-34), Jesus speaks intimately and encouragingly to his disciples, "my friends": "Do not be afraid, little flock." God is determined to give them the *basileia*/the reign of God. If they are centred in God, nothing else matters.

In the second part, Jesus tells a parable (Lk 12:35-39).

In the third part (Lk 12:40-48), Jesus explains the parable after Peter asks: "Are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" (Lk 12:41).

The Parable

This parable is one of those puzzling stories which turn the familiar into the radical – convention is subverted to bring about change.

Jesus gives a wonderful image of the master who withdraws from a banquet, arrives home and finds his faithful slaves are expecting his return. He dresses like a

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RL 19th Sunday Ordinary Time: Luke 12:32-48

RCL 9th Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 12:32-40

slave himself, stands behind his reclining slaves and serves them with part of the banquet.

History Behind the Text

The parable has a context: a particular world with norms that are being challenged. Translators and others often shy away from the word “slave” as “servant” seems more acceptable. But in the hierarchically organised society of Jesus’s time, there were rigid, clearly defined roles and relationships. The master would have belonged to the wealthy upper classes whose way of life depended on a slave labour force. The brutal punishments to which slaves were subjected are well documented (Lk 12:46-48). While the slaves in the parable behaved as slaves were required to – alert and waiting for the master’s return – it is the master who shocks by stepping out of his prescribed role.

We can be awake to the reality of modern-day slavery and the various forms of trafficking of humans in our world which is all too real — the third-largest global criminal industry behind drugs and arms trafficking.

Theology In the Text

Disciples are to “be dressed for action” or to have their “belts cinched tight”. It reminds us of God’s direction to the Hebrew people on the eve of Passover to let their “loins be girded” for their journey (Exodus 12:11). In the heat of the climate, women and men wore long loosely fitting robes nearly touching the ground. Slaves and workers would tie a belt or rope firmly around their waist and tuck their robes up out of the way if they were preparing to walk a distance or do strenuous work. They were ready for action with “lamps lit”. Today we’d say: “to have our boots on.”

Two key words help us understand this parable. English translations usually say the slaves are “waiting” for the “return” of the master. But these words also mean the slaves were “expecting” the master who “withdrew” from the banquet to come to them. “Expecting” is more active and exciting than “waiting”. And “withdrew” suggests that the master slipped out of the banquet before it was over.

So the master comes home, find his slaves “expecting” him “so they may open the door to him as soon as he comes”. But instead of being tended to by his slaves, the master fastens his own belt like a slave and invites them to recline to eat (as was the custom). He comes and serves (*diakonēo*) them – meaning serving as if carrying out a sacred mandate, or ministering to them.

The parable begins and ends with: “Blessed are those slaves” (Lk 12:37, 39). The slaves do not earn blessedness by working or serving but through being what they are: ready, expecting, a happy, blessed presence in the household. Jesus is encouraging his disciples to be the same.

Spirituality Called Forth by the Text

The parable urges us to watch. To stay awake. It is about being like the slaves: alert to the present “sitting with reality, allowing it to work on us” as theologian Dean Brackley puts

it. We are to be watchful and wakeful – contemplative. We can dismiss contemplation as a way out of the ordinary every day – a way to focus on higher things. But the parable turns this on its head: it urges us to be contemplative in our wakefulness to the moments of everyday reality. We are challenged to “dress for action” and “expect” to find the Risen Jesus in the ordinary things of every day. Watching and staying awake is prayer. In the parable, we contemplate Jesus ministering to “blessed” disciples just as we are called to find ways of ministering to those around us.

And what of that uncomfortable word, “slave”, that translators shy away from? We can be awake to the reality of modern-day slavery and the various forms of trafficking of humans in our world which is all too real. The United Nations says people trafficking is the third-largest global criminal industry behind drugs and arms trafficking. Maybe, like the master of the parable, we need to consider withdrawing from the rich banquet of our lives – often furnished from slavery and exploitation – to attend to how we can support the abolition of slavery and trafficking once again in our world. That could be by learning about modern slavery and the organisations and government initiatives that are working against it. We can buy from those companies who conscientiously check that their supply chains and the entire process in the production of their goods is free of slavery. By speaking out against modern slavery and supporting the initiatives of those focused on freedom for all workers, we can minister to the poor who depend on us for the kind of life God dreams for them. ☉



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