

- Our Gospel reading this morning presents us with a *real challenge*. If you find yourself asking *questions* about what Jesus says, you are not alone. Here is the obvious one: *How can Jesus commend the bad behavior of a corrupt steward ~ as a good example for people of faith?* We have a reading translated from Greek, which was *itself* probably an earlier translation of Jesus' words in Aramaic. Therefore, we have to try to put our head into the text, in order to understand it. So... *how can 'the children of this age' provide a commendable example to 'the children of light'?* Two paintings by Raphael may be able to help us with this ~ paintings you may have seen before. (*see handout*)
- They are found in a remarkable room in the Vatican Museum, painted about the same time that St. Peter's Basilica was being built next door. Visitors entering this room face the fresco on the *lower* part of the handout ~ it looks *like the sanctuary of a church*, with an altar and the sacrament upon it. On either side of that altar, and above it, are depictions of famous saints and biblical figures, as well as the Holy Trinity. Then, *turning around* in that same Vatican room, one sees the fresco in the *upper* part of the handout. It is the famous *School of Athens*, depicting great figures from the classical world, with Plato and Aristotle in the middle. *Tour guides typically present these two paintings, which face each other, in terms of the contrast between them. They say things like this: "Here, on this wall, we have the best minds of the pagan world. But, on the opposite wall, we see great saints of the Bible and the Church."* Or, to use Jesus' words, we see '*the children of this age*' in the upper image, *contrasted* with '*the children of light*' in the lower one.
- *Yet*, it's quite possible to look at these *related* paintings in two *different* ways. We *may*, at first, be disposed to see the *contrast* between them, as *tour guides typically do*. But we might *also* be open to seeing the *continuity* between them, *even if* the *content* of the two paintings seems rather different. For example, those who notice *continuity* will observe that *the two*

frescos are *composed with the same elements* ~ the same colors and textures, and, that the two spaces in which the figures walk or sit *may be* in the same building. Further, the perspective or vanishing point in each painting *converges* upon that of the other.

- Finally, *visitors entering this room walk in the same direction as Plato and Aristotle*, and –*with them*– toward the altar on which the sacrament is displayed. *As a result*, visitors standing between the two paintings are at the equivalent of what would be ‘*the crossing*’ of a church, a church which looks remarkably like St. Peter’s, *next door*. And so, *as Raphael designed it*, *Plato and Aristotle are in the same company as visitors to this room*, who *join them in approaching* the altar in the fresco showing all the saints! Therefore, these two paintings provide a splendid illustration of **continuity**. (pause)
- *Let’s consider* some *pairs of words often coupled together*: Christ and culture; Kingdom and world; Old Testament and New Testament; Israel and the nations; grace and nature; heaven and earth; church and society. *Without my saying anything more about them*, you already have an impression about their meaning. Our upbringing disposes us in this way: When we think about Christ and culture, or any of these other word-pairs, *some of us* anticipate finding points of **continuity** between them. *Others of us*, when hearing these same pairs of words, assume a **contrast** between the words in each pair.
- As a result, *when it comes to spirituality and faith in daily life*, *some of us* are temperamentally inclined to look for **continuity**. *Other folks among us* are more disposed to seek **contrast**. Yet, *in situation after situation*, the important factor is **context** to help us determine whether a focus on **continuity and/or contrast** is called for.

- And so, in relation to Jesus' challenging parable today, *paying attention to continuity and contrast* will help us better understand our Gospel reading. Especially when *Jesus seems to be lifting up a negative example* from the *fallen* world as a way of *commending a Kingdom principle*! What are we to make of that? There is *one key sentence* we should notice, because it marks the end of Jesus' parable, and then signals his comment upon it.
- At the end of his parable, Jesus says, "And *his master commended the dishonest manager* because he had acted *shrewdly*; for the children of this age are more *shrewd* in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." This is *an obvious contrast*, rather than something about which Jesus implies *continuity*. *Because he is making a comparison*. He contrasts how the children of this age respond to circumstances, compared with the way the children of light do. *Jesus contrasts two modes of thinking and behavior*.
- The *harder part of this Gospel to discern involves how Jesus also employs the idea of continuity*. Instead of just focussing on the contrast between the children of light and the children of this age, we should also ask about how the children of light *could be*, and perhaps *should be*, like the children of this age. *Can you think of a way that the children of light should think or act like the children of this age?* (That is the nub of the matter that Jesus is talking about here.)
- The literal answer may involve supplying *a few missing words*, words which Luke may simply have assumed: {*when it comes to how they make choices*,} "*the children of this age are more shrewd ... than are the children of light.*"
- In other words, *Jesus is expressing a lament*. His parable about the dishonest steward illustrates a common way we react when our 'back is against the wall.' We get *clever*; we think outside the box; and we use our

wits in order to survive. *If we can do this so well*, when it comes to the dishonest ways of this world, *why can't we be equally clever about the things of the Spirit?* If we can be so adept at figuring out how to get around the tax code, *why can't we be equally astute in our reading of the Bible* ~ and about how to survive and flourish in the Kingdom of God?

- Writing to Timothy, Paul refers to how “*our Savior... desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*” If so, *wouldn't God go to any extent* to help us receive this knowledge? And yet, curiously, we spend so much of our time trying to be more knowledgeable about, and skillful with, the ways of this world, than we do the ways of God! *Our Lord can only 'shake his head' in lament about this.*
- Indeed, it moves him to tell a story that illustrates *just how far we are prepared to go*, to survive and do well. Yet, if that is our *true* motivation, *why don't we try to survive and flourish where it really counts* ~ in the life of the Spirit?
- *To those who think they are already holy, already spiritually knowledgeable, Jesus stresses contrast* - emphasizing discontinuity between this world and the next. *But, he urges those who are meek and humble, to perceive continuity and connection.* For those who follow him and God's ways, there is no barrier between this life and the next. In him, *the gulf has already been crossed!*





Raphael, *The School of Athens*; *Disputation of the Holy Sacrament* (The Vatican), ca 1508-1520

CONTRAST and CONTINUITY

### Luke 16:1-13

Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' *And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.* And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

---

Notes