



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (13th September) 2026

In former generations, the life of a courtier was an expensive undertaking. Just keeping up with the Fitzroy-Joneses involved constant demands on one's wallet. Few of them routinely had the cash to hand and were obliged to borrow from one of their curial associates. One would lend money to one's betters to curry favour and to those further down the food chain to exercise power over them. Most people's financial situation was characterised by a complex mosaic of debtors and creditors. After Cardinal Richelieu died, it took years to settle his affairs, settling his debts and recovering the money owed to him - the latter task never completed successfully. Misjudging this balance of borrowing and lending could lead to ruin: several Florentine bankers lost their shirts when crowned heads defaulted on their loans.

Something of this underlies the parable of this morning's Gospel. The man at the centre of the story has both borrowed money from his master and also lent funds to one of his subordinates. The debt to the master fell due and for whatever reason, he did not have the wherewithal to honour his obligations. It might seem that the master demonstrated munificence in forgiving the debt: and, indeed, financially, the man was quids in. However, the financial consideration would have been just one aspect of the event. The need to be forgiven the debt, because he was unable to pay, was an experience of total humiliation. The man was a busted flush at court, the carefully cultivated image of an urbane aristocrat was shattered.

It was whilst he was in what we might consider a fragile frame of mind - probably in shock from his public shaming - that he bumped into a man who owed him money and he lashed out - perhaps grasping at the straw that he was down but not out: there were still some over whom he could exercise power, which he did in a brutal way. To add to his misery, although the master disparages his ingratitude, he also implicitly suggests that in being forgiven his debt, he had lost the right to demand the repayment at all, let alone in the manner that he did - and his disgrace was complete.

There are several lessons, which can be drawn from this passage in the Gospel. The duty to forgive in the light of God's forgiveness of us is the one, which Jesus primarily infers, because He relates the story in response to a question on the subject.

However, it might also prompt us to reflect on the treachery of worldly status and the way that it draws us into its ruinous clutches. There is, of course, the financial peril as we spend our way into matching the material trappings of our peers - or of those into whose circle we aspire to rise. However, status can be established in other ways - fashionable attitudes, respectability or the right interests and preoccupations; and in our own day with its appetite for people to define themselves, there can be a tendency to exaggerate character traits to establish a particular identity for ourselves within the crowd.

A focus on developing and sustaining our earthly status can become the controlling goal of our lives, in the process modifying in not altering completely our moral framework. Like Dorian Gray, underneath the carefully cultivated image a rather less attractive persona develops. In the parable, this uglier side of the man bared its face when he encountered the one who owed him money after his humiliation.

If we make the pursuit of earthly status the end to which our lives are directed, then we shall set ourselves on the road to ruin.