

Trinity XIV 2019 Year C (P20/OT25)

I have taken the opportunity this year to read or reread some Russian literature. The first few months were spent battling my way through *War and Peace*, which certainly had the great merit of sending me off to sleep as much of my reading is done at night! *Anna Karenina* was next – not exactly a bundle of fun, but with a strong message about finding God – Konstantin Levin who provides the parallel storyline to the tragic Anna, only finds true happiness with his life and family when he finally turns to Christ. Good old Tolstoy.

The third novel was *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky. I must own up here that when I used the example of a film a couple of years ago (*War of the Planet of the Apes*) as providing a strong religious message, at least one member of the congregation went off to the cinema and thought that they had never seen such rubbish in their lives! So if you haven't read *The Brothers Karamazov*, if you do so, please don't blame me!

The favourite novel of (amongst others) Einstein, Freud, Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Josef Stalin, again it is ostensibly a book about the work of faith (or the lack of it) within people's lives as well as a study in psychology. There are some exceptional passages of great beauty; including an ecstatic account of faith and life by the Staretz (holy man) Zosima, together with a very moving finale at the grave of a young boy. I shall say no more. In fact are you wondering if this is some tack for me to avoid talking about the Gospel reading today – *The Parable of the Unjust Steward*? Partly.

The truth is that whatever way you choose to read this odd account, it is confusing! It is sandwiched between the powerful and memorable Parables of the Prodigal Son and Dives and Lazarus. you can't help wondering if Luke was faced with some random material from a miscellaneous file! It almost as if he was thinking to himself, 'Well, I've got to put this somewhere, because people have treasured these words of the Lord. Perhaps if I put it here, people will be able to make something of it.'

As Jane Williams the theologian writes, the parable feels as if it was remembered incorrectly, or had its punchline forgotten. It may be that even those listening to the Lord didn't understand it, hence its odd nature. Perhaps (as she suggests) it was originally meant to be funny, as some of the words of Jesus undoubtedly were. We sometimes try too hard and read every word as piously as possible. Is this the answer here?

Who are we meant to identify with? The rich man or the dishonest steward/manager? Luke keeps telling us time and time again that the rich will be sent away empty and that the poor will be exalted. We know at the start that the rich man doesn't keep an eye on what is going on until charges are made against the manager. Our sympathies lie with the manager until we hear him diddling the rich man to save his face with others by reducing debts owed to his master. Then we realise that the steward is crooked. To crown it all, the rich man then commends him for making friends through dishonesty, before it turns into a lecture by Jesus about relationships and true riches. No wonder it is perplexing!

In fact it may be useful to go back near the beginning to note that the rich man asks for an account of the steward's management. This accounting is reflected in many of our everyday

lives. Many of us will have been asked at school or at home to explain our actions to a teacher or parent about various things (it certainly happened to me often!). We are called to fill in our tax forms every year, or sometimes we walk through the door at home and hear the words, 'We need to talk.' When we gather around the altar – the table of the Lord – we are invited to remember and seek forgiveness for those things which we have said, thought or done which separate us from God.

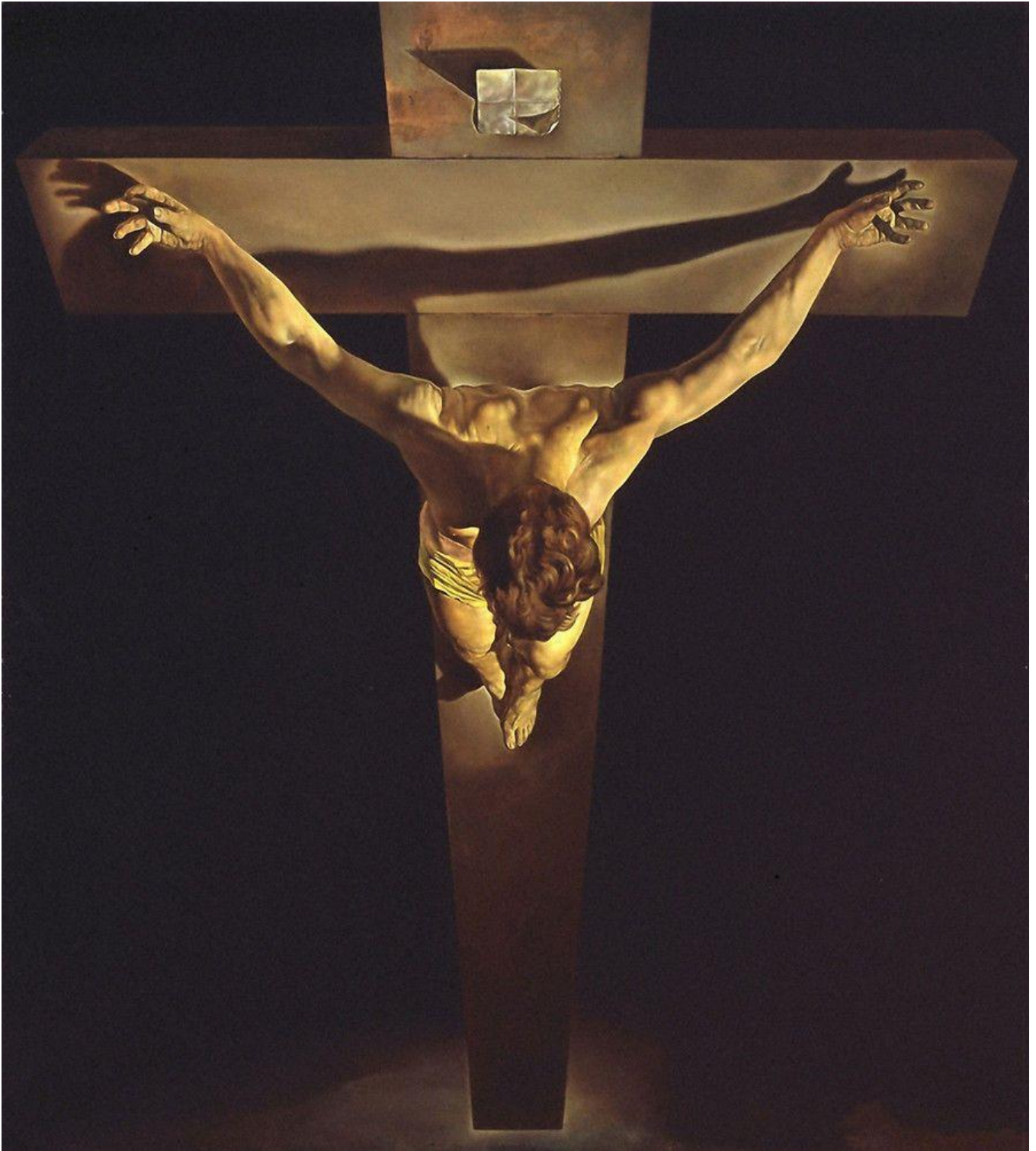
We are called to account, and sometimes this will be an uncomfortable or even dispiriting action – certainly where the tax form is concerned! Yet this calling to account can be transformative in the way it calls us to be honest with ourselves in all our dealings, be it with money, people or situations. The steward must explore the inner workings of his relationships and the assets at his disposal. It also speaks of the gift of intellect as well. Jesus talks of *'the shrewdness of the children of this age,'* compared to *'the children of light.'* We can ask ourselves the same question about the way in which we live our lives. We are called by the Lord to allow the Spirit to work within our lives to transform not just ourselves, but the world. In fact the world comes first. In loving the other we ourselves are transformed. Mercy, Compassion, forgiveness and love – all facets of imitating the Lord in all our dealings.

This calling to account applies too in societal matters. How does this nation and others measure up when called to account? God or Mammon? Capitalism, socialism, or despotism? A marriage feast in Afghanistan becomes a place of terror when a suicide bombing takes place; Christians tortured and murdered in North Korea; drugs, breakdown of relationships and addiction of all kinds; degradation of our planet, and injustice left, right and centre.

Question: How is it possible to make a difference? **Answer:** Because **all** of us have been entrusted with great riches; money (in the case of many of us - it is Stewardship next Sunday!), but in **so** much else, even more important. Our Faith provides us with the greatest riches in serving the call of Jesus within our lives - all to be used in every aspect of our dealings with the world.

Perhaps another lesson we can take from this parable is noting that the steward squanders the rich man's property which ultimately causes the rich man to praise him for being astute! We worship a God, who squanders his love for each one of us in sending his Son. Jesus squanders his love for you and me by walking the road to Jerusalem to draw us to new life. We, too, are called to squander: to squander love for God, for our neighbour, for our enemies and even ourselves; called to squander forgiveness and compassion on those we feel separated from; squander compassion for the sick, the poor and the oppressed. We are called to squander our money and prayers on all in need and for the work for peace and justice.

The realisation of the fulness of God's Love made known in Jesus, reveals the richness of life we are called to squander on all we meet. As faith ultimately transformed many of the characters in my Russian novels, in the **real** world **we** are called to be transformed in squandering the love and grace of Jesus Christ in all we do, knowing that he walks with each of us on our journey towards the fulness of life.



Christ of St John of the Cross (part) 1951 – Salvador Dali (Glasgow – Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum)

Amos 8:4-7

⁴ Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
⁵ saying, 'When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practise deceit with false balances,
⁶ buying the poor for silver

and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’
⁷The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

I Timothy 2:1-7

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. ³This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, ⁴who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵For there is one God;

there is also one mediator between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human,

⁶ who gave himself a ransom for all

—this was attested at the right time. ⁷For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth,^[a] I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Luke 16:1-13

16 Then 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. ²So he summoned him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.” ³Then 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. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” ⁶He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” ⁷Then 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.” ⁸And 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. ⁹And 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.

¹⁰Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No 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.’