

Reflection on the Gospel-25th Sunday in Ordinary Time C
(Luke 16:1-13)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

In her insightful and engaging 2005 work, *Dancing with Strangers*, Melbourne-based historian Inga Clenninden offered a new perspective on the famous incident of the spearing of Governor Arthur Phillip at Manly Cove on September 7, 1790. The “accident” at Manly was no accident, she argued, but a carefully staged and brilliantly executed response to the indignities inflicted by the British, albeit unwittingly, on the local inhabitants. The hero at Manly Cove is Baneelon (later known as Bennelong) who secures, for a time at least, the honour and survival of his people. He does so with all the cunning, if not the subterfuge, of the steward in Luke’s parable, and wins an uneasy approval. An ever present motif in the story of these early British-Australian encounters is the understanding of possessions and land peculiar to each.

From eighteenth century Manly Cove back to first-century Palestine is quite a leap. At stake in both arenas are survival and honour. Luke’s unlikely hero is a property manager or steward accountable to a land owner (the master) for the collection of rent from land poor tenants who work the land and pay their rent in produce. The steward is reported for mismanagement. He is called in, asked to produce the books, and told he is about to be sacked. He thinks quickly, approaches the debtors, reduces their sizeable debts by the stroke of a pen, and thus gains their undying loyalty. He then hands over the books. While he has engaged in a series of smart moves, he is far from honest! The master is caught in a cleft stick: his steward has outwitted him and secured his own survival; the master has no honourable redress. He shakes his head and acknowledges the cunning or practical wisdom of the steward.

It must be noted that there is no critique in this parable of the injustices inherent in a system that maintains privilege and subordination. That may be a matter of consideration for disciples in our times. The parable reminds us, rather, that disciples need to have the practical wisdom or cunning of the steward, though to different ends. The parable gives way to a number of sayings about money and its use or misuse. While “money” as a means of exchange has long since been an integral part of life in the Earth community, it can become an obstacle or even a substitute for right relationship with God. The implication in the final saying is that disciples are called to “enslave” themselves to God. Contemporary attitudes to slavery might suggest that we find more appropriate expressions for our relationship with God. Not everything in the gospel parables is to be emulated.