

PROPER 20, Sept. 18, 2016, Year C

"...for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." (Luke 16:8)

- In the course of a tour through the Vatican Museum, you will come to a remarkable room ([note handout w 2 images](#)). The room's walls were painted by [Raphael](#) about the same time that St. Peter's Basilica was being built next door. You enter this room facing a fresco that looks like the east end of a church, with an altar and the sacrament upon it. On either side of the altar are depictions of famous saints and church leaders. And above them, we see not only biblical figures from both Testaments, but also a portrayal of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (portrayed as the descending dove). Then, *turning around*, you see one of the most famous frescos in Europe, *the School of Athens*. It portrays the greatest figures from the classical world, with Plato and Aristotle in the middle. [Tour guides typically present these paintings, which are on opposed walls, in terms of the contrast between them](#). One of them will say, "Here, on this wall, we have the best minds of the pagan world. But, by turning around, we see great saints of the Bible and the Church."
- Based on our upbringing, most of us [will look at these related paintings in either of two 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 seem 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 [could 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 travel in the *same* direction as Plato and Aristotle, and *toward the altar* on which the sacrament is displayed. Therefore, 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.¹ And so, as Raphael has designed it, Plato and Aristotle are *in the same company* as visitors to the room, who with them *approach* the altar in the fresco with all the saints!²

- Let's remember some pairs of words *often* coupled together: *Christ and culture*; *Kingdom and world*; *Old Testament and New Testament*; *grace and nature*; *heaven and earth*; *church and society*. Without my saying *anything more* about them, we *already* have an impression about their meaning. Our upbringing has had this effect: *When we think about Christ and culture, or 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.
- *Continuity and Contrast*. We notice *both*. When we focus on *continuity*, we look for how things *overlap* in appearance or meaning. *Continuity* refers to a perceived *similarity* among things, *in spite of* noticeable differences. Attention to *contrast* is just the *opposite*. '*Contrast thinking*' focuses on noticeable *differences* between things, and gives greater significance to how they *stand apart* from one another.
- Here is the question we need to ask: *when we hear about Christ and culture*; when *Kingdom* is mentioned alongside *world*; when someone talks about *grace* and *nature*; or when a person says *church* and *society*, *what do we expect?* Do we *anticipate* that the speaker *will highlight the contrast* between them? *Or*, do we anticipate attention being given to *the overlap between them?* Experience shows that, when it comes to spirituality and faith, *some of us* are temperamentally *more inclined* to look for *continuity*, while *others* are more disposed to seek *contrast*. The point is *not* to make *continuity and contrast* into an *either/or*. For they are often *both-and-related pairs*. The important factor is *context*, to determine whether a focus on *continuity and/or contrast* is called for.
- In relation to Jesus' parable today, paying attention to *continuity* and *contrast* will help us better understand our Gospel. *Especially when Jesus seems to be lifting up a negative example from the fallen world as a way of commending a Kingdom principle!*³ 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.*" (Luke 16:8)
- This verse provides us with *another pair of terms* to add to the short list we have already made: *children of light*, and *children of this age*. *We are right to think of this as an obvious contrast*, rather than something about which Jesus implies *continuity*. Because Jesus 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 ourselves 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*. *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* - a *discontinuity* between this world and the next. But, he urges those who are meek and humble, to see 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!

Notes

¹ The floor plan of many traditional churches has a cruciform shape, with a longitudinal and a horizontal axis. The conjunction point of the two axes is therefore called the “crossing,” and often represents the meeting point of the main aisles of the church.

² Obviously, much more could be said about the content of, and relationship between, these two Raphael frescos!

³ Part of our challenge results from *trying to hear Jesus rightly across at least two translations* ~ the *linguistic* translation from Jesus' Aramaic to Luke's Greek, and then on to our English; but also the *historical* translation from first century Palestinian culture to our own. These are always potential issues when we read the Gospels. But they are particularly significant in relation to this passage.