

The Crafty Steward

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Once again earth's youngest citizens have stood up for something that affects us all.

They were out in force this week in cities across the world, determined to bring attention to the devastating prospects of global warming and climate change. Such motivates transcend the usual ideologies of left and right. Our children are pleading for the survival of the planet as our shared home in which human beings can continue to flourish. This will require a severe reduction in our consumption of natural resources.

These protests stand in an honourable tradition. A tradition that includes the abolition of slavery, votes for women, disability rights, the defeat of apartheid and the rolling back of discrimination in all its pernicious guises.

Today's new citizens are calling into question the way we measure success in material terms. They

challenge the prevailing economics based on ever-increasing personal wealth and consumption. They are in favour of crafting an economy designed with communal wellbeing in mind. Their message is not unlike the prophet Amos in today's first reading. Prophets in every age identify what is wrong and corrupt, they decry its consequences (including the suffering of the poor) and they call out for reform. For the sake of this and of future generations we have to hope that our latter-day prophets succeed.

Perhaps there is something to be learnt from the crafty steward in today's gospel.

When he finds himself accused of mismanaging his master's business he has the nous to change his approach.

Unexpectedly, the master commends him for reconfiguring the debts. It's as if the steward's behaviour persuades the master of the merits of acting in the common good.

There are echoes of this kind of change of heart in a book that inspired a young slave to believe that one day he might be free.

“I was barely twelve years old, [wrote Frederick Douglass] and the thought of being a slave for the rest of my life began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled *The Columbian Orator*. Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book... I found in it a dialogue between a master and a slave... in which the whole argument on behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave said some very smart and impressive things in reply to his master – things which had the desired though totally unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.”

Sadly, Douglass didn't persuade his own captors to have a change of heart and free him. He had to

take matters into his own hands and escape to a state where slavery had been abolished. Once free he forged a successful career as an orator, journalist and publisher always pressing the case for abolition. Like the steward in the parable he became a persuasive advocate for a new way of doing things. He did this with immense good will and no rancour. He firmly believed in the equality of all peoples, whether white, black, male, female, indigenous peoples, settlers or migrants.

He consistently championed dialogue in preference to conflict; which annoyed those seeking revenge for the evils they had suffered. When challenged about this Douglass replied: “I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong.”

Such clarity of moral intent combined with a call to unity of mind, hope and purpose in pursuit of healing the planet surely deserves the generous, joyful, wholehearted application of our collective imagination, guile, love.

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