

The Rich Fool parable Luke 12 verses 13-21;32-40 ff Oatlands 7th August 2016

Money and possessions; cash and stuff is a key theme in both last week and this week's gospel readings from Luke chapter 12. Since the big cycle ride may have deprived you of hearing last week's gospel I will try and bring you up to date with both gospel readings. The readings are full of familiar verses—life is more than the abundance of possessions—we hear the story of the rich fool; of the folly of hoarding wealth for yourself alone but not being rich towards God, and in today's gospel.. we hear Jesus telling his hard up, debt burdened, anxious peasant followers to “sell your possessions, give alms to the poor—provide purses for yourselves that will never wear out, a treasure in heaven that is beyond the reach of thieves and corruption, for where your treasure is there will your heart be also.

Yes it is all dangerously familiar to those who have heard this before- **but the key challenge is, is it making any difference to our attitudes and actions with respect to money and our large quantities of stuff?**

“Money is the root of all evil’- so goes the saying and song—the trouble is that it is **not** what St Paul actually said in 1 Tim 6 verse 10 “For the **love** of money is a root of **all kinds of evil**”.

It is greed for money, the want of more and more of it that can be the source of all kinds of evil - not money in itself which in the end is just bits of paper and metal....

Money Represents Value

In the end cash is only bits of metal and strips of paper, but the reason these bits of paper and metal are of any concern to us at all is that in our culture we have established that these pieces of metal and paper will function as currency. **They will represent value.** So money is significant for us simply because we exchange it for what we value. What you do with your money shows what you value with your heart.

We value life and taste, so we give money for food. We value education, and so we give money for books and tuition. We value entertainment and recreation and so we give money for Sky sports, Netflix and nice holidays. We hopefully value the ministries of the church and the work of charities meeting the needs of the needy...

Jesus said here in Luke 12:34, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” The movement of our money, the nature of all our stuff, signifies the movement of our heart. Where our money goes, our heart is going. We exchange money for what we value, what we treasure.

That's what led the German Theologian Helmut Thielicke's to assert that :

“Our cheque books have more to do with heaven and hell, than our hymn books.”

Money is both hazardous and helpful, in that the pieces of metal and paper that we have in your pocket or purse have the capacity to show that you value things more than God (which is hazardous), or that you value God more than things (which is helpful). The paper is nothing, but its expression of the treasures of your heart is everything.

Jesus has just been speaking about sober and serious matters of the cost of discipleship – and suddenly, and hardly fittingly, someone speaks up and says: (verse 13), *“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”* Clearly here is a man who is preoccupied with a family matter over money and inheritance- and issues like this arise regularly in every culture and generation...brothers and sisters falling out over inheritance ...clearly for this man it was an obsession which eclipsed any serious thoughts about following Jesus.

Now Jesus is confronted with a choice. Will he get down into the nitty-gritty of the inheritance dispute, or not?

He says (verse 14), *“Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you.”* And then he gives a warning about how hazardous this inheritance is. He says (in verse 15), *“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

Jesus then tells them a pretty blunt story. It is not just for the man who asked the question, but for *all* of us. We are all listening in.

"The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

Bumper harvest---reward from God... Now it is not a bad thing when your "land produces plentifully" (verse 16). It is not a bad thing when your business prospers. It is not a bad thing to receive a promotion and with it a pay increase. It is not a bad thing when your investments increase in value. That is not the evil in this parable. He is not called a fool for being a productive farmer. God knows this broken world needs profitable businesses and productive farmers (think of what happened in Zimbabwe!).

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He planned for the future- any financial adviser would commend this canny farmer for his foresight and strategic planning...

"I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain.

¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."²⁰ ...

Sensible, prudent, forward-looking - Joseph in Egypt...plansstore up...made provision - enjoy his retirement- something many, many people long for, dream of...

He said to himself now I can "Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

Why, then, in the story is he called a fool? That's the question in this parable. Not only a fool, but a fool who loses his soul. Verse 20: "God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you.'" He was tragically a "damned fool." Why?

What's wrong with what the farmer thought and planned?

He is partly a fool because ironically while he has striven to provide financial security for his future he has ignored, neglected to insure against the one certain event in life which is his eventual death. He seemed to overlook the findings of extensive surveys which have concluded that 1 out of every 1 persons will at some point die. He had a completely misplaced sense of security. The possessions, the stuff, the wealth he accumulated for himself alone would never be able to go with him beyond death. We brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out. Yet we too easily ignore the fleeting reality of our life, treating as permanent what is transient.

If we stayed in an average Premier Inn or Holiday Inn room for a week, I doubt that we would remove all our money from the bank to decorate the room with gilt and cover the wall with Van Goghs. Why not? because the hotel room is not home. We will only be there for a little while. It would be foolish to waste the treasure of our one and only life on a temporary residence.

This is our 'room' – our home and furniture and clothes and possessions will last the equivalent of a few seconds compared to the eternity that will be occupied by our soul. Jesus said do not store up treasure in your hotel room- it's not home- we will only be here for a little while.

So he was a fool for ignoring reality of life and death, but he was also a fool because overlooked the difference between two kinds of richness in life: richness of having and richness of being. Richness of having is an external circumstance. Richness of being is an inner experience. We usually focus on richness of having. We think true happiness lies there. Our language reflects this when 'haves' keep popping into our thoughts:

If only I could have my dream house

If only I could have a higher salary or bigger pension

When I get a more decent car

If only I could have financial security, nicer clothes, better holidays, shinier toys...

We seek richness of having, but what we really want is richness of being. We want to be grateful, joyful, content, free from anxiety, and generous. We scramble after richness of having because we think it will produce richness of being, but it does not. In the sense of 'having' we can become rich by putting in long hours, shrewd investments and a lot of luck. But it is possible to HAVE barns full of money and a boatload of talent and movie star looks and still BE poor. The bottomless pit of desires will never be satisfied. No matter how much we have we remain 'not enough' people.

On the other hand we can HAVE very little and yet BE rich. A rich soul experiences life differently. It experiences sense of gratitude for what it has received, rather than resentment for what it has not got. It faces the future with hope rather than anxiety. Richness of being is always available. I can seek it at any time, with God's help, to be compassionate, generous and grateful.

Richness of having usually means getting more 'stuff'.

Richness of being usually involves giving away, practicing generosity.

And the source of this confusion and foolishness for the rich fool was that he filled his barns with Self and not God...he was so full of self-interest that he ignored God and ignored his neighbour...if a true fulfilling enriching life comes from the focus of the two great interconnected commandments to love and treasure God above all and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

First he is so focused on himself that he gives no credit to God for the harvest God gave him and then secondly his plans show no apparent concern for sharing with his needy neighbours the bounty God had given him.....the rich man obviously thought all he had he owned by right...

To an adult, it's ironic when a two-year old says "Mine" Adults know that two year olds don't earn any of their stuff. It is all provided for them. It is a gift from someone much larger and wiser than they. And 2 year olds don't even generally take very good care of it. The rich fool did not acknowledge that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and who live in it." My stuff, my money, my possessions are not mine; it is lent. And one day I will give account.

So what essentially makes this man a fool – it is that he lives a completely self-centered, me-centred life.I illustrated the man's inner monologue at a family service more than three decades ago with the help of my friend **bobby the balloon**--- Listen to Bobby's speech and we can count the number of times **the holy trinity of 'I', 'me' 'mine'** occur in Luke 12 verses 17-19 . **"The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I (1) do? I (2) have no place to store my (3) crops.' ¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I will (4) do. I (5) will tear down my (6) barns and build bigger ones, and there I (7) will store my (8) surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I will (9) say to myself (10), "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." (ten times).**

²⁰ “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ **(Let go of the balloon!)**

In the stunned silence after the story Jesus said:

²¹ *“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”*

The way the rich farmer used the increase of his riches showed no indication of being rich toward God. The use he planned to make of his wealth said one thing: **“My treasure is relaxing, eating, drinking, and fun.”** That is my life. And the riches in my barns make it possible.

The parable warns of the hazards of greed for wealth, but points towards where true wealth and contentment lie; it is in being (verse 21) “rich toward God.” The phrase “rich toward God” is unusual. What does it mean to be “rich toward God”?

Life is not fundamentally about having things, Life is knowing God. John 17 verse 3 states **“This is eternal life, that they know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”**. “Rich toward God” means counting God greater riches than anything on the earth. “Rich toward God” means using earthly riches to show how much we value God. This is what the prosperous farmer failed to do. And the result was that he was a fool and lost his soul.

Interestingly If this farmer **had** been rich towards God, how might he have thought?

“God, this is all yours. You have made my fields prosper. Show me how to express with my riches that you are my treasure, and the riches are not. I already have enough. I don’t need a bigger and bigger safety net. I don’t need better food, bigger wine cellars, better parties. I do indeed want to make merry, but not in self-indulgent parties with rich retirees on their £100 million pound yachts (coincidentally that is the cost of Sir Philip Green’s yacht!). I want to make merry with the people who have been helped by my generosity. I want the fullest blessing of giving. Because you taught me, Lord, it is “more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

Finally let me finish with a brief mention of three areas which may be ways by which to become richer in God and which may also acts as indicators as to whether we are moving in the right direction.

They are areas I certainly struggle with.....don’t express them from any position of strength or success.

1. Generosity

If we are reluctant or grudging givers to others and other causes then it **may** indicate we are more interested in storing things up for ourselves than being rich towards God. But if we are becoming happier and readier to lend or give away what we have because we are trusting God to meet our basic needs, we may be growing richer towards God. If we find we are less preoccupied with seeking more and more but increasingly feel ‘enough is enough’ then we may be moving towards being richer in God.

2. Stewardship...Do we have a growing sense that what we are stewards of what has come from God in the first place and is given for a purpose- a purpose that is more than that we take life easy for eating and drinking and making merry, but which is for the sharing with and benefit of others? We need to think of what we have as a blessing from God and use it to glorify God and serve the common good.-if that is the direction we are moving then we may be becoming richer towards God, and **finally**

3. Carelessness by which I don't mean casualness but caring less about things and caring more about people.....about becoming less concerned, less preoccupied with possessions. Do we hold tight to our possessions- struggle to lend, become paranoid about every scratch on our car; find it hard to cope when we lose something... Things are impermanent- they will all rust, decay and will be destroyed.....A growing awareness of what is temporary- which applies to things, stuff; and what is permanent, which is largely in the area of relationships, not least our relationship with the Lord. If that is the direction we are slowly moving in then it might be that we are becoming richer towards God.

Prayer ...St Ignatius of Loyola

Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous;
teach me to serve thee as thou deservest;
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to seek reward,
save that of knowing that I do thy will.