

A reflection for the seventh Sunday after Trinity

“Who wants to be a millionaire?” sang Frank Sinatra in the film “High Society”. The response from his co-star Celeste Holm was “I don’t”. But by the time of Chris Tarrant’s TV show of the same name, the implied answer was “You bet I do”.

I read somewhere that that one out of every ten verses in the Gospels are about what I hope you’ll forgive me if I crudely call stuff: having too much stuff, not having enough stuff, having trouble letting go of stuff, letting stuff become too important, loving stuff more than people, wanting stuff more than God. There are a hundred variations on the theme, but what drives them all is the human quest for – shall we call it - treasure. And Jesus said “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be as well”.

So who wants to be a millionaire?

Well, whatever the answer to Sinatra’s question, I guess most people can imagine an amount of money, or other resource or investment that would allow them to relax and enjoy life to the fullest.

An amount that stops them waking up in the middle of the night, unable to go back to sleep for all of the lurking worries - children’s or grandchildren’s student loan, their deposit for a house, runaway inflation or the affordability of social care. And all the while Jesus says the only safe investment turns out to be whatever richness we’ve been able to store up towards God.

But then on the other hand we're confronted by the demands of the culture we live in, that sees nothing wrong with unrestrained spending. In fact, you might say the culture we live in depends on it.

We're told that if the economy is a bit sluggish, then that's because some of us are not spending enough on treasure. Retailers are having a hard time, so if we don't buy more stuff, then businesses are going to fail, salaries are going to dry up, funding for the NHS and schools will be jeopardy, and pot holes still won't get filled. So the worst thing that any of us can do, apparently, is to cut back on our treasure hunts. The nation, it seems, is counting on us – so to speak - to build more barns. It's the patriotic thing to do!

But Jesus calls it greed. The Greek word for it is Pleonexia: the insatiable desire for more. It's what, in that story in Luke's gospel, Jesus senses in the man who interrupts him while he's talking to a crowd of people about fear. "Do not fear those who kill the body," he is saying to the thousands who have come to hear him. "Do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say..." And he's about to tell his followers not to worry about what they'll eat or what they'll wear, because life is more than what you eat or the body what you'll wear.

He's getting down to the basics of how to survive those middle-of-the-night panics I was talking about earlier when someone in the crowd interrupts him to ask for his help in mediating a dispute. There's an estate to be settled – and where there's a will there's a relative. There are at least two brothers involved, and the elder-the executor-is apparently

dragging his heels. "Teacher," the man says, "tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

But Jesus won't do it- not because he's not interested in justice but because he senses an insatiable desire in the man - and worse than that, desire for something that will never fix what is broken inside him. While Jesus was speaking about fear, this man got so afraid that his mind went immediately to what might make him feel safer - namely, getting his hands on his inheritance. But Jesus knew it would never work, which was his opening to tell the parable of the rich fool.

It's important to remember that the rich fool was just a fool. The fact of his riches wasn't the problem. There is no suggestion that he was any kind of crook. Certainly, he was self-centred. Notice how he liked the word "My". It's My crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my soul. All his conversations were with himself - he asked himself questions, answered them himself and then congratulated himself on his good sense.

But he came by his treasure honestly. It was a simple success story, really. That's how those who listened to the story may have heard it. The weather was good. He was fortunate with his crops – surely a sign of God's blessing - and then he was willing to work hard to protect what he'd been given, so that his dream of early retirement might come true in one beautiful summer. He had his million! He could relax. So what exactly made him a fool?

You've heard all of the obvious answers before: it was his greed, his selfishness, his undistributed wealth. He was a fool because he thought life would be complete once he had his treasure tucked up under brand new roofs. He was a fool because he'd forgotten

that the things that really matter are the things that money can't buy. Money can't buy eternal life, money can't buy forgiveness of sins, money can't buy the faith that moves mountains, money can't buy the hope that walks in rhythm with God's step; or the love that won't let you go.

He was a fool because he thought he'd have years to enjoy what he saw as his treasure. Instead, the neighbours would find him lifeless on his sun lounger the very next morning.

All that's true. Why was he a fool? The problem with the obvious answers is that they mostly provoke guilt and fear, and I've never thought of Jesus's teaching like that. So perhaps there's something else - that the rich man was a fool because his quest for treasure was too limited. Or to put it another way, his sense of purpose was too small.

He'd fallen for the myth that accumulating stuff was a big enough purpose for human life.

He dreamed of the day when he could say to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry." But the "relax" part never seemed to come, because it was so hard to know when he had achieved the "ample" part. Where treasure is concerned, it's always a real challenge to decide how much is "ample", because there's always the temptation to think that point has never quite been reached.

Jesus's kingdom message is that life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions, and that human beings were made for something more noble than building treasure storage units. The time may be ripe to revisit the question of purpose - not only for each one of us individually but also for our whole barn-building nation.

As with almost all his parables, Jesus doesn't give us the answer; he never says what it means to be "rich toward God." The parable he tells that brother so concerned about his inheritance isn't designed to solve the man's problem but to let him know that he has one. And, if the parable works, to empty his hands of his present treasure so that he is free to seek a different kind of richness

And what about us? The rich fool asked himself the key question and came up with his own answer. To sense whether our life and God's life are flowing in the same direction, perhaps we should ask ourselves some questions about our possessions and our sense of purpose.

Am I intentionally listening to God's word and prayerfully trusting Him for the needs of life?

How ready, or reluctant, am I to lend my possessions to others? (Willingness to be generous is a pretty good indication of how much you recognize everything you have is ultimately on loan from God.)

Am I constantly looking out for ways in which others can enjoy what I own, or are my possessions really a wall that insulates me from the outside world?

Does my enjoyment, my flourishing, my entertainment coincide with the joy of others, or does it come at others' expense?

Does my wealth make me and others free, or does it make me and others a prisoner?

Do I fundamentally want the things that everyone else can have as well?

These are some of the questions that perhaps test whether we're becoming rich towards God.

But if we have to be greedy, then let's be greedy for love. Be greedy for justice, and wisdom, and, most of all, greedy for a closer relationship with God. That way, when it

comes time to show God what is in our treasure chest, there won't be any doubt that we're rich. Amen

30 My guess is that every person here has a different purpose, a different way of being rich toward God. Some people really do need to quit their soul deadening jobs and find work that is richer in purpose. But a whole lot of other people could wake up to the purpose that is available to them in their lives right now. One of the saddest things in the world is to talk with someone who believes that what he or she does is small change in God's pocket, not even worth counting. As far as I can tell, there is no such thing.

31 The world is in terrific need of mending, and no stitch/contribution is too small. As discerning Christians have been discovering for almost two thousand years now, it is possible to pick up a straw off the floor for the love of God. It's just as possible, I believe, to diaper a baby, or roof a house, or simply to sit in a wheelchair and be a friend for the love of God.

32 The important thing is to sense how your life and God's life are flowing in the same direction-and if you are clear that they are not, then to do something about it. Get yourself a purpose as soon as you can-one that helps God mend the world, and mends you while you are at it - maybe even one that costs you more than a new laptop or a Lincoln Town Car, but which promises to do you a whole lot more good when God shakes you awake in the middle of the night so that you can spend some quiet time thinking about what your life is worth.

33 Until then, if we have to be greedy, then let's be greedy for love. Be greedy for justice, and wisdom, and significance. That way, when it comes time to show God what is in our treasure chest, there won't be any doubt in either of your minds that you are rich, rich, rich.

Amen