

Rich in God's Sight

Luke 12: 13-21

Money problems! We all have them!

Two brothers once had big money problems. They were arguing about how much each should inherit and one wanted Jesus to sort it out. But Jesus wasn't getting involved. And anyway, they had got their priorities all wrong. Instead, Jesus told them a story.

This is the rich farmer who owned lots of land.

This is the seed that belonged to the rich farmer, who owned lots of land.

This is the harvest of wheat, grown from the seed that belonged to the rich farmer, who owned lots of land.

These are the small barns that tried to store the harvest of wheat, grown from the seed that belonged to the rich farmer, who owned lots of land.

These are the larger barns, built instead of the small barns that tried to store the harvest of wheat, grown from the seed that belonged to the rich farmer, who owned lots of land.

And these are the truly massive barns, put up to take the place of the larger barns, built instead of the small barns that tried to store the harvest of wheat, grown from the seed that belonged to the rich farmer, who owned lots of land.

This is the sound of the all-night party in the big house, not far from the truly massive barns, put up to take the place of the larger barns, built instead of the small barns that tried to store the harvest of wheat, grown from the seed that belonged to the rich farmer, who owned lots of land.

But this is the sound of silence ... after death interrupted the sound of the all-night party in the big house, not far from the truly massive barns, put up to take the place of the larger barns, built instead of the small barns that tried to store the harvest of wheat, grown from the seed that belonged to the rich farmer, who owned lots of land...

... and who died, having forgotten that the most important thing in life was to be rich in the sight of God.

I wonder, what is it that makes us rich in God's sight?

What makes us poor?

What can we do about it?

A major obstacle to our spiritual life can be the misuse of resources. The Parable of the Rich Fool is but one parable of many in Luke's gospel about the threat that possessions pose to our spiritual life – how they can get in the way of our relationship with God. The shock of this parable for the audience at the time would have been that this rich man was a fool in God's eyes. Rich people were usually understood to be blessed by God. And, indeed, riches can be a blessing, but it's our heart's attitude to wealth that matters and this man is condemned for getting his priorities completely wrong. He never considers the poor or even anyone else, so concerned he is with his own future well-being.

It doesn't take much to see modern-day versions of this rich fool's behaviour. You will remember just as the pandemic took hold that it was impossible to find toilet roll in the shops. And then pasta, pasta sauce, canned food and flour became scarce. It wasn't that everyone suddenly needed these items. Sadly people were buying them in huge quantities and hoarding them for themselves, with no thought for anyone else. So when Jesus was asked by one brother to tell the other to give him more of the inheritance, his warning about greed is as relevant today as it was then: *'Watch out!' he says, 'Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.'*

Jesus had a real gift for telling a story, often starting with some aspect of everyday life that was ordinary and everyone could recognise. In this case, it was a man gathering and storing his harvest. Yet, typically, the story has an edge, a challenge to the man who tried to get Jesus to take sides in an inheritance dispute. There is irony here, as well as an invitation to recognise ourselves.

Before we condemn too quickly the foolish barnbuilder with his massive barns, obsessed with having more, we might look more carefully at our own reflection in the mirror. Jesus always asks us to examine ourselves, rather than judge another. This is challenging, uncomfortable even, yet also hopeful, because Jesus is always inviting us to see things differently.

What does each of us preserve and hold on to as evidence of our success or as some form of security? Maybe what we're storing up has little or no monetary value. If you had a barn, what would you put in it? Maybe you could draw the

outline of a barn on a piece of paper and think about what you are storing there. A virtual barn can be filled with all sorts of things you are attached to, such as goals and desires, and anxieties about how others see you. Oh, to have an empty barn! In other words, to find joy and liberation in moving beyond possessiveness of any kind.

At the end of the parable Jesus concludes: *'This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.'* But what does it mean to talk and live out being rich toward God? There is a simple unspoken question in this parable: what should the man have done with the contents of his barn? Imagine yourself as that man. What leads you to store up the harvest and what would make you divide it?

In early Jewish tradition, when there was a generous harvest this was understood as a gift to ensure care for the poor. It was always a community thing. How have we moved to seeing abundance as something for the individual rather than the whole community? How can we live in faith communities as examples of an understanding that the harvest is for everyone not just for the individual? Last week, I happened to be channel hopping looking for something to watch and came upon the last episode of *'Dinnerladies'*, the comedy series written by Victoria Wood in the late 90s, set in a fictional work's canteen and centred around the key character – Brenda (or Bren) played by Victoria Wood. In the last episode, Bren's mother, played by Julie Walters, dies and sends Bren a video of her last will and testament recorded in her hospital bed. In the hospital bin bag of her belongings, Bren finds an envelope stuffed with £50 notes, which is a bit of a surprise given that she lived in a caravan behind a petrol station! The canteen is closing down and her future is uncertain, but Bren happily hands out wadges of banknotes to her friends and colleagues, ensuring that they too benefit from her windfall.

More recently, during lockdown, there have been lovely messages posted on the Cottenham and Rampton community Facebook pages of people offering to share their possessions for the benefit of others, whether that's from an abundance of house plants, cookies, cakes or from a book or clothes sort-out. But what it demonstrates is a community that cares. And I suspect that this is what makes us rich towards God. Because sharing is much better than accumulation – better for us as individuals in avoiding greed, and better for others, as people benefit from our generosity.

I suspect that the pandemic has forced many people to re-think their priorities over the last few months as everything feels more fragile and uncertain. Maybe some of the things that we thought *were* important aren't actually as important as we thought them to be. In a letter to clergy this week, Bishop Stephen writes that *'Coronavirus has laid open in stark reality what is wrong with many of our patterns of living, and the terrible inequalities in our society – in housing, health, education, employment patterns – and has forced us to reflect collectively on what it is we really value.'*

The rich fool's error in today's gospel reading was his desire to provide only for himself and to value his possessions above others and above God. But we're called to be rich toward God and to use our resources so that they become tools of service that benefit others and enable us to serve God better. How today can you use what God has given you for the benefit of others? Are you generous, or are you a hoarder? We must remember that how we use our wealth is one of the aspects of stewardship that God will examine one day. Maybe we can all benefit from taking some time this week to reflect on what it is that we truly value and how we can use what God has blessed us with.