

Harvest 2017 – Bigger Barns

Using the story illustrations by Nick Butterworth

There was a farmer who couldn't help but get rich because the ground he owned was rich and fertile. All he had to do was plant seeds....

And up came the most fabulous crops.

The farmer had more than anyone else – I mean he had more than a Waitrose warehouse.

One year he had so much corn it wouldn't all fit in his barn it was bursting at the seams.

So he drew up plans to build a much bigger barn – I mean...really big

But when harvest came around next year – his new barn wasn't big enough. Partly because he had also planted carrots.

No problem thought the farmer – I'll build an even bigger barn – this one will be humungous.

This was by now the biggest barn anyone had ever seen – but it was still too small for the corn and carrots and the farmer was also growing cabbages.

So the farmer decided that this time he wouldn't mess about and he would build a barn so huge there was no possibility it could be filled

The barn almost touched the sky and the farmer thought to himself – tomorrow, when I bring in my huge harvest I can simply stop, and enjoy myself. From here on I will have a party.

But that night wasn't going to end for the farmer....because that was the night God told him his time was up – his days were done, his life was over.

Jesus says – how silly for the man to spend his whole life storing up riches for himself, and not having treasure in heaven.

At this point our children were set the task to build some big barns using straws and plastacine.

Most of Jesus parables are deliberately like big colourful cartoons – no wonder cartoonists like Nick Butterworth enjoy interpreting them.

The parables Jesus told were like good jokes. The comedian leads you down one way only to surprise you with an unexpected punch-line.

A man had spent his whole life hankering after a boat but his wife always said no. One day, without telling her, he went out and bought a boat. When he came home to tell her there was something of an argument, but she calmed down because he said that she could be the one to name the boat.

When the man went to the marina the next day he saw the name she had painted on the side. For Sale.

Jesus parables were colourful and funny but they had a twist at the end to surprise and challenge and warn.

In Jesus days the Pharisees had a simplistic theology. Riches were a sign of blessing. Blessing was God's favour on the righteous, therefore riches equalled

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righteous – in God’s sight. If you were poor, or sick, or disabled then it was because you were a sinner.

That was the cultural norm for Jesus day. Rich = blessed. Poor = sinner.

We wouldn’t make judgements like that would we?

On the 16th May it was reported that Lavinia Woodward, an Oxford Educated student stabbed her Cambridge educated boyfriend in the leg. The judge has just given a ten month sentence suspended for 18 months, because she was talented and just too bright.

It may be the sentence is the right one – she has been receiving counselling and help with addictions – but I can’t help feeling that we have our own caste system running. Academically successful puts you in a different category to others. Would an unemployed, uneducated woman with an addiction get the same treatment?

When you start thinking about it, we all have our own ways of judging between ourselves and others; a way of deciding who is deserving or undeserving. There’s more than a little Pharisee in each of us.

Someone in the crowd around Jesus calls out – *Teacher tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.* It was quite normal to ask respected Rabbis to judge in a dispute. And what’s wrong with the request we might ask? It seems to us only fair that brothers share an inheritance – not that we make snap judgements about other people....but, it seems fair.

Yet Jesus clearly perceives something else in this man. He is concerned about wealth, where is his concern for the Kingdom of God? So he tells the parable.

Jesus makes clear in His story that the reason the farmer is successful is that his ground is fertile. Nothing to do with being righteous – simply, that he has good ground.

Two things emerge in the story. The farmer’s interests are on himself alone.

He thinks to himself
What I will do
I have no place to store
This is what I will do
I will tear down
I will store surplus grain
I’ll take it easy for years to come.

There’s no awareness of the need of anyone else and no apparent concern for anyone else – it’s just me, me, me.

The second thing to emerge is that he has no awareness of anything beyond his own life. To go all theological on you – no awareness of eschatology – the theology of death, judgement and the end times.

The greatest neglect of his life is that he hasn’t stored up for himself treasure in heaven – he is not rich towards God.

Last week we began a series thinking about “The Kingdom of Heaven”. Terry was preaching and reminded us that we should expect the unexpected in God’s

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Kingdom. Certainly God's kingdom goes against the culture which encourages us to amass wealth for ourselves.

Jesus never criticises wealth. He criticises those who misunderstand that everything belongs to God in the first place and whatever we have should be used for His glory.

And like all of Jesus colourful cartoon parables, the twist in the story suddenly caught me out – I should have expected the unexpected.

I didn't regard myself as anything like the farmer in the story and then it suddenly occurred to me that my last house was as big as a barn and we had filled it with tons of stuff. I defend myself of course – it wasn't MY house, it came with the job. It was John Player the industrialist who funded the church and Vicarage and he built a five bedroom humungous place not me – but I still filled it to bursting. Two couples, friends of ours, came on two separate weekends to help us empty just the attic! I'm more like this farmer than I first thought.

Harvest is a wonderful festival because it presents us with an opportunity to give and to recognise that we, like the farmer, can focus on entirely our own need.

I wonder – what for you might be a bigger barn? Will you allow the punch-line of this parable to challenge you? Can the Holy Spirit reveal that there's an area of life where 'farmer-like' you are storing away for entirely your own benefit.

Harvest reminds us of the needs of others and presents the opportunity to make a difference. On the 13th

October the 4women dinner has a guest speaker and the topic to explore is raising an awareness of homelessness and how it happens. The event will raise money for that charity, but equally make us aware of how, and why and where this happens.

To close though I want to share a true story from last Monday evening.

I was invited to go and meet the cubs and was asked to speak about inequality and foodbanks. I took along a large bowl of chocolate and sweets.

I divided the cubs in to two groups and decided to give the group on my left a chocolate each. I then asked the others how they felt. They were angry, it was unfair, and one very perceptive boy – that it was random. Good answer.

Having talked for a moment I then handed out another chocolate – to the same group on my left. There was outrage from the group on my right.

Then something unexpected happened unprompted by me, entirely natural. A boy from the group on my left took his chocolate and gave it to a boy in the other group. That was tremendous.

But it meant he missed out and he recognised that. Perhaps he thought I would reward him there and then for his generosity – a sort of scouting version of the prosperity Gospel. You know – give generously because God will reward you even more generously.

I didn't give him extra but I told him that he had done something very fine indeed and most importantly the

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people that matter (his leaders) had noted his generosity. He demonstrates the true nature of sacrificial giving. We go without. I hope he discovers the joy of giving – the deep satisfaction of generous giving.

That simple act by a generous boy teaches us all we need to know about storing up treasure in heaven.

In the second chapter of James it says this

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

As we seek to be a people who live by faith, let us take heed of the parable. Let's allow it to challenge our comfortable notion that we cannot possibly be like the farmer. Where and what is in our barns? Are we judgemental about who we will give to and who we won't.

When we give, to do so joyfully, sacrificially and to allow the Holy Spirit to orientate our thinking towards the values of the Kingdom of heaven – and not of this pervasive culture.

Perhaps as a response – we might say a confession, using the Kyrie response which is on the screen. As I say Lord have mercy you respond – Lord have mercy.

God our father, we are sorry for the times when we have used your gifts carelessly and acted ungratefully.

Lord have mercy

We enjoy the fruits of harvest but forget that you have given them to us. We belong to a people full and satisfied but ignore the cry of the hungry

Christ have mercy

We are thoughtless and do not care for the world you have made. We store up for ourselves alone, as if there was no God and no heaven

Lord have mercy.

May almighty God, who sent His Son into the world to save sinners, bring you his pardon and his peace, now and forever. Amen.