

Sunday 4th August 2019, Sermon on the parable of the rich man

'Relationships Are the True Treasure'

Gospel: Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' ¹⁴But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' ¹⁵And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" ¹⁸Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ²⁰But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

Our modern world seems to be built on anxiety. We can see it on people's faces as they travel to and from work, race around the supermarket, worrying about if they can get everything done. Modern life seems to encourage people to succeed, set ever higher targets, and worry about if they are doing well enough. Then there is the current uncertainty in politics, the world situation, employment, the way the country is going. So much contributes to a general dis-ease. Then the widespread use of social media, and what Jonathan Sacks calls narrow casting rather than broadcasting contributes to the general uncertainty together with our concern about fake news and misinformation.

Is this how we are meant to live?

"Watch! And be on your guard against avarice/greed of any kind."

I wonder what thoughts this quote from today's gospel reading cause us to have? Did you think, "Yes! We need to talk more

about avarice and greed"? Or was it more like, "Oh, no. here comes a sermon about money and planned giving"? Sometimes it is said that 'Church is not the place to talk about money', or 'I give my time and talents instead', or 'doesn't the church have plenty of money?' The topic of money tends to make many Anglicans shift uncomfortably in their seats. There is a view that the church is wealthy – though I can't see selling churches or churchyards as being easily accepted and the reality is that we, as every parish, needs to finance itself.

We predict an income of £100 000; £70 000 will pay the parish share to the diocese, the rest needs to cover everything else, the next largest amount going to pay for our musical tradition, then utilities, insurance, fabric, outward giving and mission work. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it was the other way around?! Through great generosity and hard work we have paid our way.....our income comes from approx. 70 planned givers, events, hiring the hall, and donations. Talking about money is uncomfortable, but then, talking about money makes us uncomfortable in the larger context of our daily life as well – not something to bring up in polite company. Any question about income, the cost of that new bathroom or car or holiday is generally brushed aside. From an early age, we learn that there are some topics, like sex and money that are not for polite conversation.

Today we are going to talk about money! Why? Because we, as Christians, model our life on Jesus, we follow his teaching and Jesus himself did talk about money. He talked more about money and possessions, and our relationships with them, than any other topic. 11% of Luke's gospel connects with wealth and possessions and in the Bible as a whole there are, it is said, over 2000 verses that on wealth and possessions. So if Jesus can talk about money, so can we; and today's readings propel us to do so.

Luke tells us of Jesus being in a crowd of people, teaching. A man approaches Jesus and asks him to arbitrate a dispute he is having with his brother about an inheritance. This man's request may seem a bit odd at first glance. Why would Jesus be asked a legal question? Jesus was a respected preacher and teacher and in first century Palestine, Pharisees were often asked to act as judges over these types of legal disputes. Jesus, however, side steps getting involved in this family squabble over property. Instead, he uses it as an opportunity to talk about money – and more importantly, a right relationship with money.

Jesus tells a parable that is often called the Parable of the Rich Fool. Let's look at it. The rich man: he isn't portrayed as particularly wicked. He is not described as one whose wealth was ill-gotten. He hasn't cheated anyone, he's not one of the tax collectors – who are often portrayed as among the bad guys in the Bible accounts – and he hasn't stolen anything. From the information we're given, he became wealthy through his own hard work. And at first glance, his decision to save for the future by building bigger barns doesn't sound too unreasonable either; after all, he does need space for his abundant harvest. What's wrong with saving for a rainy day?

Well, there's nothing wrong with saving for a rainy day. The foolishness of this man isn't in his plan to build bigger barns.

What is wrong is his spirituality – it how he relates to his wealth. Let's notice the words:

“..I have no place to store my crops? I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

We notice the emphasis on “me.” In this short dialog, the man uses 11 references to himself with the personal pronouns “I” and “my.”

This is part of this man's spiritual illness: He is all about me, myself, and I. There are no references to others– not to family or friends, and certainly no references to God. He is under the mistaken belief that all this wealth is his: his possession, his to control, and that he alone produced this wealth.

(The other delusion that distorts this man's relationship with his wealth is uncovered when God addresses him: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

In the face of the stark reality of death, the truth is revealed: No amount of wealth or possessions can save you from your own finitude. You will die, and nothing on this earth can prevent death. Your possessions are temporal and are not of ultimate worth. They will not save you.)

We all know, in our heads, that we can't take our wealth with us. But often our hearts don't really believe it. We are anxious about money – anxious about our jobs, about paying for children in higher education about having enough for retirement. As followers of Christ, we are called to shift our focus away from ourselves and outward towards God, and our neighbour as ourselves.

When our focus moves outward in this way, we begin to view our wealth very differently. First, we realize that it isn't our wealth at all – it all belongs to God. Not only has our wealth come from God, even our own talents by which we are able to obtain our wealth are gifts from God. None of it belongs to us – it's all on loan. The Rich Fool hasn't realised that the wealth he claims isn't really his, he only has temporary custody of it.

The second thing we realize follows on: If all comes from God, then we have an obligation to God to use our wealth in right ways.

This recognition moves us from being consumers of resources to stewards of God's good gifts. We begin to ask different questions about the use of wealth: "Where can I best use this money for everyone's benefit?" "How can my wealth be a blessing?"

So Jesus' teaching is not a condemnation of wealth or ambition; rather it is an invitation to view our material possessions differently. Can our wealth and possessions help us live a relatively comfortable life? Of course they can. Can they make us confident that we are worthy of God's love and guarantee us right relationships with God and each other? Absolutely not!

Christ invites us into deeper relationship with God and with others – a treasure far greater and more enduring.

Prayer: O God, the giver of every gift that endures, only by your grace can we rightly understand the wonder of life and why it is given. By the word of your Son challenge our foolishness, confront our greed, and shape our lives to the wisdom of the gospel. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son

Notices:

A leaflet has been prepared about Planned Giving and has been distributed. Planned Giving envelopes. About 70 planned givers, over 100 on the electoral roll, community of 250....if you are not a Planned Giver please do consider joining and supporting the ministry and mission of the church in this way.

Mission Action Plan (MAP) – first column – loving God, PCC will be reviewing this after the first 18 months and considering ways that we can grow in this area,fourth column, fabric and structure, much achieved through generosity and hard work so we pay our way.

If a church was faced with closure, I'm confident that money would come in, **Survival**, people give so the church is there in case they need it.

Many people give because they wish to **support** the church. The work of the church is seen as important and people say to themselves, 'I have a need for belonging. I see myself as a member of the supporters club.'

Some people see themselves as members and wish to contribute their fair share. So the money given is like a **subscription**.

Like the rich man in the parable, there is nothing bad about all of this. It's all quite understandable. Yet, what churches teach and hopes for is that more people will come to see themselves as disciples, followers of Jesus. We put God first.

So a percentage of our income is given to the church each month. (rather than what is left over)

Disciples say to themselves.., I see a deeper meaning in life and my giving responds to God and not just to the needs of the church.

More information in the leaflets.

For all. We are the church, we don't come to church, we are the church.

If you are not on Planned Giving, please take information; please do talk to members of the Planned Giving Committee.