

**Pentecost 10. 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2010**  
**Luke 12:13-21; Colossians 3:1-11**  
**Rich?**

Pity the poor fool in the Gospel story. What's he done wrong? he sounds a lot like an average retiree, superannuated or self-funded. He's had a bumper year, so he's putting away the surplus, rearranging his portfolio as he goes, maximising his assets. In terms of responsible stewardship of his wealth, what's the problem? He's saving for a rainy day; planning his retirement; he's looking to the future where there may well be lean years. Isn't this what we're supposed to do?

Remember the story of Joseph, way back in the Hebrew Scriptures, who built new barns to hold the abundant harvests during the "fat" years in Egypt so that the people (including his own family, who had tried to kill him) would have enough to eat during the "lean" years. That was commended; as were, it seems, men in other parables of Jesus who invested their master's money and made good returns.

But in this parable, the voice of God calls this landowner a fool; he's not calling him morally or ethically corrupt, nor a sinner, but a fool. And Christ goes on with the judgment that this man has stored up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God. Why a fool? And are we all fools when we store up treasure?

We don't have to be ultra-smart detectives to pick up the clues that makes this man's decisions a bad call in God's eyes. There's more than a few hints that he's quite self-focused - eleven times he uses the first-person ("I" and "my") and never "our" or "their"; this wealth appears to be all for himself -not for sharing as in Joseph's story. He's not foolish because he makes provision *for* the future; he is foolish because he believes that by his wealth he can *secure* his future. He equates the needs of his soul with bodily goods: "Soul", he says to himself, "you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry". And there's no sense that maybe his riches are a gift from God and could benefit others. There's no thanksgiving, there are only thoughts of self-interest. So -just as Christ says - the problem is storing up treasure for oneself, and being stingy in relation to God and the things and people of God.

And in the end, his self-preoccupation is interrupted by death. And all his plans come to nothing; to foolishness of thinking he's got the future nailed as he'd like it. And as the old saying goes "you can't take it with you".

It's tempting to think that Jesus is just down on material things and wealth. But Jesus is not condemning the wealthy, rather, he's critiquing those who place their trust in their accumulated wealth, as though wealth in itself was a sign of the blessing of God. As though wealth can give us the sort of future assurance and security that really matters. Jesus is going deeper than wealth; he knows the seductive power of possessions, and he wants to clear the way for us to be rich towards God, and so to know what real blessings and joy are.

There's a false promise deeply embedded in our culture that we can meet our deepest needs with money and material possessions. We see this in the parable:

The man's anxiety about the inadequacy of his barns mirrors in some ways our own preoccupation with handling our possessions, protecting them with security systems, investing them safely, worrying about them. There's a lot of people out there making money through their "Wealth Creation" seminars and businesses. And as we age, as we plan for and live our retirements, the pressure continues to be on us to be focused on money. Our fears and worries tend to kick in more strongly the closer we come to retiring, and afterwards. The voices of fear whisper to us. Is our income enough? Have we invested wisely? Are we really going to be able to fund our retirements and live the way we want to? Will we be able to be self-sufficient, independent, make ends meet? What if our super fund goes bust?

When the material aspects of our lives loom large, they do distract us from what is really important. They do take our eyes off what God's riches are. Wealth is not wrong or sinful, but it is problematic. The spiritual problem of wealth is that it anchors our hearts too firmly in this world, rather than in God's kingdom.

As commentator David Lose writes: "The allure of money is that it creates the illusion of independence. It promises us that we can transcend the everyday vulnerabilities and needs that remind us that we're mortal, created beings ultimately and always dependent on others and, most especially, on God".

Jesus knows that for some people the pursuit of wealth and possessions seems to function as a kind of religion substitute. It's been the same across all time, cultures and peoples. Hence the strong words, the recurrent theme of both warnings and wisdom about wealth that run through the whole Scriptures, like this parable. While affirming that we live in the real world of commerce, they teach us that we should not make material possessions into a god, that life is fragile and ultimately in God's hands and that we need to sort out what is really important and lasting before it is too late.

And Jesus gives us the way out of being caught up in the building of bigger barns, the way out of ensnarement in materialism.

He tells us to be rich towards God. What *does* that mean?

Hear how Jesus begins this parable, in response to a question about an inheritance wrangle: "Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions". Listen, says Jesus: take care that your possessions, or your worry about them, do not own you; take care they do not control you.

Our reading from Colossians helps us here: fix our minds on those things that are above, not earthly; the riches of loving one's neighbour, justice, salvation, forgiveness, new life in Christ, peace with God and each other. To build our lives on relationships that reflect the self-giving love and grace of God. Renewed lives, that speak and behave in ways that honour God, and love our neighbours. It's about trusting that in God's love for us, he will take care of us. That's his promise to us.

And this is about responsibility; about how we live, about what comes first in our lives and about how we prioritise what we have and have access to. It is about how we use what we have for God's glory, and how we might turn what we have into God's sort of riches, into justice and equity and into something that will enable both the sharing of God's riches and the sharing of material resources.

It is also about being on guard lest our works and achievements and possessions become their own religion; knowing that these are worth nothing if they in themselves have become the source of our life and spiritual satisfaction and have taken God's place in our lives. It is knowing that our security is in God and that God will take care of us.

The story is told that at the funeral of the fabulously wealthy Aristotle Onassis, one of the mourners turned to another and said, "How much did he leave?" And his friend replied, "Everything. He left everything."

If you were standing before God tonight and explaining what came first in your life, and what you were doing about it, what **would** you be saying? What would you **like** to be saying and **what** are you going to **do** about it?