

LUKE 12.13-21: THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

There is an old story about a man who thought he had the future licked. By some magic he had got hold of a copy of the *Financial Times* dated a year in advance. What incredible good luck! He knew what stocks to buy and sell, what properties to purchase. He rubbed his hands together with glee, until he turned a page and read his own obituary!

Just as shocking was the story Jesus told about a farmer who experienced a bumper harvest – one of those harvests which come round just once in 20 years. Everything went just right: it rained when it ought, and it didn't rain when it didn't ought! The net result was that he had a bigger and better harvest than he could ever have hoped for.

Extra combine harvesters had to be hired, bigger storage units had to be built. This was really a summer to remember – he had hit the jackpot well and truly. So there he sat late one warm summer's evening, with a glass of cold chardonnay, gloating contentedly, looking forward to the good time to come.

“Lucky man”, he said to himself, **“You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and enjoy yourself”.** (12.19)

But God said: **“You fool”.** You'll never be able to take advantage of your newfound wealth. **“This very night you will have to give up your life; then who will get all these things you have kept for yourself?”** (12.20)

1. LIFE IS NOT DEFINED BY WHAT WE HAVE

“You fool” – you utter fool – said God to the farmer of long ago.

‘You fools – you utter fools’, says God to us today.

For although we may not be in the farming business – although we may not be able to distinguish barley from wheat or indeed oats from corn, we are all like the fool in the parable, we all want more.

That is what the rat-race of life is all about – that's why so many people catch the 7 o'clock Liverpool Street train in the morning and then stagger back to Chelmsford 12 hours later. We want to get more out of life

- So when we leave school or university, we look for a well-paid job
- We then buy a car, a house, and get a wife
- Then we send the wife out to work, because we want more money
- Then we change jobs again because we want more money or because the prospects of getting more money are better or because the pension is better
- Then we have a family, we buy a better house, we buy a second car, we take out an additional private pension
- We continue to work all the hours God gives us to get further promotion which in turn will bring yet more money

Alas all too often the first prize in life's rat-race turns out to be a heart attack

This last week the papers have been attacking the greed of the city – and in particular those ‘spivs’, as the tabloids call them, who for the sake of a massive bonus short sell stock and plunge respectable companies like HBOS into the abyss. But let’s be honest: if we had the opportunity, many of us would have done the same. Greed affects not just city traders. In these times of credit crunch, we would all love more cash in the bank. We are like Tevye, who in the ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ sings, “*If I were a Rich Man*”; and when told that money is the world’s curse, he response: “*May the Lord smite me with it and may I never recover!*”

Luke tells us that “**a man in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide with me the property our father left us’**” (12.13). Presumably the father had just died & the brother was being difficult about dividing up the family estate. Life hasn’t changed, has it? Death so often brings a squabbling about the will; about who is going to have this piece of furniture or that particular ornament. So the man turned to Jesus for help.

But Jesus refused to help. Jesus said, in effect, ‘*You have got your priorities wrong*’. “**Watch out and guard yourselves from every kind of greed; because a person’s true life is not made up of the things he owns, no matter how rich he may be**” (12.15). Or in the words of Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of this passage: “***Life is not defined by what you have***” (The Message). There is more to life than owning property, there is more to life than having a healthy bank balance.

It was in this context that Jesus told the parable we call ‘the parable of the rich fool’. But don’t be fooled by the word “rich”: this parable is not just for the rich who are in the 40% tax band. The parable is actually two pronged – for it addresses not just the self-contented rich, but also the discontented poor. Wherever we may find ourselves on the income scale, God says to us: “**You fool! This very night** – or some other night in the next 70 years – **you will have to give up your life** – and then what? **Then who will get all these things you have kept for yourself?** Your barns, your stocks and shares? (12.21)

There is much wisdom in the Spanish proverb: “*There are no pockets in a shroud*”. Or as the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “**We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world**” (1 Tim 6.7). Stop fooling yourselves – money and all the other things which money buys is not the key to life. The fact is that all the things we currently strive for will one day go – indeed we will go. And then what? Will we have lived life in vain?

2. LIFE IS DEFINED BY OUR APPROACH TO DEATH

To use a metaphor: all of us are living on death row. What’s more, none of us can hope to have our sentence commuted. The end is certain, even if the timing is not known.

Strangely, in spite of our common end, we do not all react in the same way. We can perhaps divide people into five categories:

1. *'The unthinking'*

The unthinking are people like the rich fool who appear not to have given a thought to their mortality. Like the Gadarene swine, who had no sense of their impending fate but just rushed down over the edge of the cliff to their death, so the 'unthinking' go blindly on, amassing corn or whatever the particular 'goodie' is. They give no thought to life and the meaning of life.

I wonder if anybody here is like that. Have you ever taken to heart the fact that one day your life will end? Have you ever asked yourself: 'What's the point of life?' Is there more to life than the state of my bank-balance?

Typically it is the young who do not give death a thought – but it is not just the young. Only this week I was reading a booklet entitled: *Reaching the Saga generation*, viz. the so-called baby-boomer generation born between 1945 – 1965, and apparently they are far more fearful of ageing than previous generations, with the result that they inject Botox under their skin and seek to push the thought of death to the back of their minds.

2. *'The pleasure-seeking'*

The 'pleasure-seeking' are those who have faced up to the fact of death, but then run away with from it. Their slogan is: "*Let's eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die*". If we've got to die, then let's make the best of it. Or to quote the Chinese drinking song (Das Lied der Erde) which Gustav Mahler so beautifully set to music:

*To strike the lute and drain the glasses
These are the things that go together
A full goblet of wine at the right time
Is worth more than all the kingdoms of the death
Dark is life, dark is death*

Make the best of it – live it up
Alas hedonism, living life for pleasure, guarantees no real joy or happiness.
As the Prodigal Son discovered to his cost, the bright lights were pretty tawdry in the real light of day

3. *'The meaning-makers'*

The 'meaning-makers' are the secular humanists who seek to face up to death by giving life a special meaning of their own.

Their slogan is: *'This life is all there is – let's make it good to be alive'*

Many of these 'meaning makers' are caring people who go around doing all kinds of good: they are involved in groups such as Rotary, Amnesty International, and the Samaritans – they are concerned for issues such freedom, peace, and justice.

But from a Christian point of view their concern lacks any logical basis. If God doesn't exist, then what basis is there for morality?

Their slogan boils down to *'Give life meaning – it has all the meaning you give' it*. But how can you give life meaning, if at the end of the day there are no absolute rules?

Secular humanism is a gigantic confidence trick, lacking any intellectual or moral support for its belief.

4. *'The despairing'*

The despairing are those driven to conclude with Macbeth that life "*is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*". Or as Jean-Paul Sartre, the French novelist & existentialist once wrote: "*Here we are, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence, and there's nothing, absolutely no reason for existing*".

I read of a young man who stood for 11 hours on an 18-inch wide ledge 17 stories above the street on the front of a New York hotel. Down in the streets a morbid crowd of 10,00 people watched – waiting to see him jump as he had calmly announced his intention of doing. One by one, people went to the widow and pleaded with the young man – his sister, some friends, a fire officer, a police officer, a psychologist, a priest, even the Deputy Mayor of New York. But quietly yet adamantly he refused to climb back through the window: "*I wish someone would convince me that life is worth living*", he said. Just as preparations were concluded for two men to be lowered from the floor above and for a cargo net to be lifted from below, he leapt to his death

5. *'The wise'*

Unlike the rich fool and others of his ilk, 'the wise' are those who have faced up not only to their own mortality, but also to God's offer of immortality – men and women who have realised that life without God is hopeless, but that life with God is full of hope. What's more precisely because they have discovered hope for the future, they also have gained purpose and meaning for the present.

Does this mean that the so-called 'wise' have become ascetics, turning their backs on all the comforts of this life, buying all their clothes from charity shops, squatting in dilapidated council flats, living only on a bread and water diet?

No, - this is God's world, and not just the world to come. They live in homes like everybody else – they dress like everybody else – and yet they don't live like everybody else – they are not caught up in the rat-race - they have different values, different goals.

Would that I could equate the wise with Christians generally – yet honesty compels me to say that not every Christian is 'wise'.

Some Christians want to live in two worlds – their faith is no more than a life assurance and it fails to affect their lifestyle to any major degree – they are as much in the business of building barns as anybody else. To them too God says '**You fool**'

3. **LIFE IS DEFINED BY OUR FOCUS ON GOD AND OTHERS**

The farmer was a fool because he failed to look ahead and reckon with the fact of his mortality. He was a fool because he focussed just upon himself, and not upon God and upon others. He might have gone to synagogue, but he was to all intents and purposes a practical atheist.

Jesus concluded: **“This is how it is with those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God’s sight”** (12.21).

The parable is a clear warning against the folly of living for material things.

Goodness, I hope that I am not depressing you with all this talk of foolishness. The parable is at first sight very negative – but of course there is a positive side. We can become rich – rich in the sight of God, that is.

But what does it mean to be rich in God’s sight?

In a very real sense we become rich in God’s sight when we respond to God’s offer of forgiveness & of life in Jesus.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: **“God richly blesses all who call to him. As the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved’”** (Rom 10.12,13). Or as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “the riches of God’s grace” are **“immeasurable”** (Eph 2.7).

There is nothing more wonderful than knowing our sins are forgiven and knowing that our future is secure. Compared to what God offers us in Jesus, all else is of little or any value. We are indeed ‘fools’ if we ignore the difference that Jesus can make to living – and to dying. The salvation which God offers us in Jesus is truly priceless.

To those of you here this morning who have yet to become followers of Jesus, let me urge you to become ‘wise’ and seize the gift of life that God wants to offer you.

But, the truth is, that this is not what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of our becoming ‘rich in God’s sight’. This becomes clear in the teaching which immediately follows the parable. Jesus went on to say to his disciples: **“I tell you not to worry about the food you need to stay alive or about the clothes you need for your body.... Be concerned with God’s Kingdom, and he will provide you with all these things”** (12.22,31)

What’s more, to be concerned with God’s Kingdom is to be concerned for the poor. Listen to these uncomfortable words of Jesus: **“Sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that don’t wear out and save your riches in heaven”** (12.33). The fact is that **“riches”** or **“treasure in heaven”** was a Jewish euphemism for charitable giving.

What do you do if you are blessed with a bumper crop?

Why, you don’t build bigger barns, but rather you give it away.

You make sure that the hungry are fed and that the poor are cared for.

Or in the context in which we find ourselves today, to be rich in God’s sight is to give generously to those in South-East Asia whose harvests have failed.

God has blessed us richly – and instead of saving up for ourselves, we are called to share these blessings with others.

Life is not defined by what we have – but on what we give

We are fools if we live life focussed on ourselves – rather we need to be focussed on others. How is that for a challenge at harvest time?