



Parables of Jesus

The Rich Fool

9 February 2020

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Ecclesiastes 2: 1–11 Luke 12: 13–21

On the walk from Liverpool Street Station into my chambers in The Temple I go along Fleet Street. There is a big branch of Boots the Chemists there. Its cosmetics department is in the front of the store and you can often see the advertising slogans through the window. They can be very uplifting. I was glad to see a while back that Estee Lauder are 'Bringing the best to everyone we touch', although clearly not everyone agreed, as shortly afterwards I learnt that 'Only Revlon is good enough'. But what others thought didn't really matter anyway, because Clarins later confirmed for me that 'It's all about you', and L'Oréal then eased my spending worries – not on cosmetics but on other things – with the very kind words 'Because you're worth it.'

These and lots of other advertising slogans are all trying to get us to spend money, of course. You can buy Panasonic for 'a better life, a better world'. What's not to like?

Mostly we ignore these things, but one advertising slogan really did catch my attention. It did so because it was pretty well straight out of scripture. There is a pub in what was the old West Station in Tunbridge Wells, and its slogan, in large letters on the outside, is a close paraphrase of our reading from Luke's gospel. The rich farmer told himself that he would soon be able to 'take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.' The Old West Station pub slogan is 'eat, drink, relax'.

What the pub owners don't go on to say is that shortly after the farmer said those words God said to him, 'Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee'.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Am I a rich fool?

A man from the crowd comes to Jesus and asks him to sort out a property dispute that the man has with his brother. 'No,' says Jesus. *Who made me a judge ... over you?*

And then he tells the parable, a parable which, like so many others, is intended to make us think honestly about ourselves. For my part I am saved the trouble of self-examination, because the Dean has already pronounced. You can see that in the Order of Service for tonight he has set out quite clearly 'The Rich Fool. The Reverend Dr Simon Taylor QC' so I know where I stand.

The first question for each of us as we hear this parable is, 'What does a rich fool look like?' Or perhaps better than that, 'Am I, or do I show any of the characteristics of, a rich fool?'

Now your instant answer may be, 'No, I don't have much money, I am not rich, and nor am I a fool.'

But the working definition – the description we are offered in this parable – of the one whom God calls a fool is not really to do with money or with intellect. What we are directed to is the man's attitudes to his wealth and possessions. By casting the parable – much of it anyway – as a monologue by the farmer, Jesus makes us look at the farmer. And then Jesus himself, in the way he tops and tails the parable, makes us consider those attitudes alongside issues of life, death and eternity.

So, to our first question. Am I a rich fool?

Self-absorption

The first characteristic we see in the farmer is self-absorption. His problem is what to do with his abundant crops, but he does not seem to think about, let alone consult, anyone else – family, friends, neighbours, his estate manager even, and certainly not God. Did you hear him saying 'I' and 'my' ten times in a very short decision making process?

What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? ¹⁸And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.

So, allowing this parable to speak into my life, I ask myself, when it comes to my stuff is my main concern me? And you might ask, when it comes to your possessions, is your main concern you? Who is allowed to use what I have, to decide what should be done with it, to benefit from it? If the answers tend to point to me, I have a problem, because I am beginning to look like the rich fool in Jesus' story.

Maybe that is not a problem for you. Maybe it is your family, if you have one, who benefit from your possessions; or maybe you generously share all that you have.

Self-deception

But even if that is you – and I am afraid it is not always me – you are not off the hook. Because after self-absorption comes another characteristic of a rich fool, and that is self-deception.

'What shall I do,' the farmer asked, 'because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?'

That was simply untrue. The farmer had barns, plural, ones that had been adequate before this bumper crop. But he wanted to store more. 'I need bigger barns?' Do you ever say something like that? Often we say 'I need ...' when what we mean is 'I want ...'

I did that recently. 'I need a new phone ...' I didn't, not really. My old one worked – it was a bit manky, but it worked. Confession time: I got a new phone. Don't judge me. It's pretty and shiny, and look how thin it is. And when I have got all my prayer apps and bible apps saved properly in nice new folders why I might even be able to relax and use them.

It's not just me and my new phone. It can be anything for any of us. We want all sorts of things – a new car, new trainers, new clothes, new whatever. And like the farmer we persuade ourselves that we need what we want. My 'I need a new phone' is someone else's 'I have nothing to wear'. Or 'I must go shopping, I have no food'. How often is that heard when the fridge is still full? All these are variants of what the farmer said.

If self-deception about our needs and our possessions is a mark of a rich fool, then a lot of us are in trouble.

Self-indulgence

Self-absorption. Self-deception. And then self-indulgence.

I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.

Now, saving for lean years is good. And saving for retirement is good too. But that is not what is going on. Commentators from St Augustine through to modern times have set this story in the context of what was largely a subsistence economy and considered what this hoarding would do to the price of grain. Augustine comments that 'the farmer did not realise that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns'.

Providing for our own futures is good; enjoying the gifts of food, drink and relaxation that come from God is good; but if our future planning is purely self-indulgent, we are exhibiting a characteristic of a rich fool.

God's opinion

We have thought about the question: do I look like a rich fool? There is a, though, a more important question. And that is whether God thinks I am a rich fool?

God thought this farmer was a fool. He said so. 'Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?' Or, in a more modern translation: 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

God requires his soul. The sense is that God intervenes at the moment of his choosing, to reclaim a loan – the loan of his life that the farmer has been given. He had a clever pension plan and a future mapped out, but missed the fundamental point that God is sovereign, not the farmer himself, that God gives and God takes away. His life is God's.

If we don't acknowledge that our lives are a gift from God and are to be used for his purposes, then when the accounting is due, God will call us fools.

And there is irony here. No earthly heirs are in view. No-one to inherit the riches the farmer prepared for himself. But he will get what he has prepared for himself. Our earthly choices have eternal implications. The sense is that an accounting will take place, and for that reason reliance on stuff is the ultimate folly.

Jesus' commentary

The parable, and that brief climax to it – 'Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee' – are framed by Jesus' own commentary.

He had been asked, you recall, to settle a property dispute. He had implied that he was not the judge in such things – we see the irony of that comment too now – and then he said this:

Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

Watch out! Be on your guard against all types of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.

He then tells the story, with all the self-absorption, self-deception and self-indulgence that an excessive interest in material things can bring, and we hear God's verdict. 'You're a fool.' Then comes the rest of Jesus' commentary.

So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

They too are fools, who are greedy, who act as if life consists of possessions, and who store up stuff for themselves. Those bits of Jesus' commentary are easy to assent to. But he goes further. We are fools if we are not rich towards God.

What does that mean? What does it look like to be rich towards God?

Being rich towards God

The underlying point is that it is not just our lives that are on loan – so that God is entitled to say 'I now want your life' – but everything that fills our lives is on loan too. That includes our money and possessions. The call is to use them for God's purposes, not just our own.

The questions this parable should prompt us to ask are these. Have we used our wealth in love and service towards the God? And have we used it to love and serve others in his name?

What will Jesus the judge say about the way we have used our money?

We have wardrobes full of clothes. Will the judge say 'Did you use my money to feed moths? Or did you use it to clothe those who were cold?'

We have houses full of valuable stuff. Will the judge say 'Did you use my money to keep thieves in business? Or did you use it to help orphans?'

We have spare rooms, and we build on more rooms. Will the judge say 'Did you use my money to house the homeless?'

We have spare food in the house and we chuck food away because it rots, or just because it goes out of date before we can eat it. Will he say 'Did you use my money to feed the hungry?'

The judge might say: 'Sum it all up for me. Were you rich towards God? Did you live a life of faith, of service, of obedience? Is there evidence of that in the way you used your money? Were you building up treasure in heaven?'

Or when our time comes will Jesus say 'You fool! Why were you not rich towards God? Why did you not lay-up treasure in heaven?'

Conclusion

Money is dangerous stuff; not evil, but dangerous. We know it brings worries and concerns: 'What shall I do with all my crops?' And wealth can make us self-absorbed, isolated from the needs and wishes of others: 'I know what I will do'. Wealth can make us deceive ourselves: we use 'I need' when we mean 'I want'. Wealth so often brings a search for selfish pleasure: 'I will relax, eat, drink and be merry.'

And then we forget, to our eternal peril, to be rich towards God.