

Luke 12: 13-21; Colossians 3: 1-11. 31.07.16

The fool and his barns

I think we can all see why the man who we read about in Luke's Gospel this morning is a fool. When he's built his latest barn and stuffed it with grain, and checked the latest share index, we are almost waiting for him to drop dead and it's no surprise when he does. His folly is clear. He has spent his life in pursuit of things that he cannot take with him when he goes – there are no pockets in shrouds, as they say – and now it's all over and what of his wealth and his barns now? And I wonder if his foolishness was evident long before he died in the effect that his pursuit of wealth had on his life – on his family, on his marriage, on his character. Indeed I wonder if his riches brought him much real happiness or satisfaction. As the old song puts it,

How many times have you heard someone say
If I had his money I would do things my way?
But little they know that it's so hard to find,
One rich man in ten with a satisfied mind.

To be fair to him, this man is not pictured as a tyrant or a scoundrel. There is no reason to think that he has accrued his wealth by unjust or corrupt means. There is no indication that he has cheated or robbed anybody. There are however, a few features of this man that are worth noting. The first is his total self-absorption and his inability to see beyond himself. We find him talking to himself, for example, and just notice the number of times the words 'I', 'my' and 'myself' feature in what he says to himself. So, we read: 'he thought to himself: 'What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* produce. *I* will do this... *I* will pull down *my* barns and build bigger ones and there *I* will store all *my* grain and other goods, and *I* will say to *my* soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up...'. His speech is to himself and it is afflicted with the personal pronoun because that is where his life is centred – on himself. Clearly, his riches have de-sensitised himself to others and he leads a self-centred life inhabiting his own world.

He seems, too, to be in denial about death. As for many people today, death is a taboo that is censored. It's interesting that this man says to himself, 'you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry.' That happens to be – almost - a common saying, one that is quoted by the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament and by St Paul in the New. The saying,

however, is, ‘eat, and drink, for tomorrow we die’ and is therefore a recognition of our mortality. But our friend has altered it – ‘eat, drink and be merry’, with the reference to death deleted. And perhaps that speaks volumes of this man’s avoidance of his mortality. It doesn’t feature consciously on the radar of his life and that’s not surprising. After all, this man lives by control. He has his empire, his kingdom, with his barns and his produce and his harvests and he has no place for anything beyond his control – and that includes his death. So he writes it out of his life story. But in all the management and control of his life and his business he has lost the sense of life’s uncertainty. He has become oblivious to the fact that the world can be a capricious and precarious place where death hovers and where it can strike unexpectedly and without warning. And he’s lost the sense too that death is something to be prepared and made ready for, that some thought needs to be given to the fact that one day we will meet our Maker to give account of our lives. So for all his control of his world he is totally unprepared for these words: ‘This very night your soul is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, where will they be?’ Or, in other words, the things you have controlled, the things you have managed and determined so skillfully – where will they be?

So I wonder what advice we might give this man this morning. How might he better handle his wealth so that he is freed from his self-preoccupation? How might he be freed for a life for others? How might he be liberated to live a life that better prepares him for his death? Well, of course we might recommend to him that he consider being a bit more generous with his wealth. Maybe he might learn to pay more attention to those around him, especially the poor and the dispossessed, and he might learn to invest in them rather than in endless bigger and bigger barns. And thinking of this I was reminded of one very wealthy man who combined his Christian faith with his wealth and I wondered if our friend might learn from him. I found myself thinking of Andrew Carnegie, the great, wealthy philanthropist. Maybe the rich fool could follow Carnegie’s example.

Andrew Carnegie had the good fortune to be born in Scotland, in the town of Dunfermline in 1835 – but he had the bad fortune to be born into dire poverty. At an early age though he managed to emigrate to the USA and there he amassed phenomenal wealth through railways and iron and steel. His was a fantastic story of hard work, determination, initiative, shrewdness, lucky connections with some very dubious people, and being in the right place at the

right time - not least during the American Civil War. Like the rich fool in our story, Carnegie was possessed of an insatiable drive, and we wonder where this came from. To what can we attribute this determination to go on creating more and more wealth? Well, it's possible that it actually came from the Christian faith. There is after all a theory that links certain kinds of Christianity with capitalism, where the creation of wealth becomes a sign that you have been blessed by God and that you are truly among the saved. Well, whatever drove him, Carnegie was utterly committed to giving it all away. He believed that wealth could be gospel, good news, but rather than merely dispensing charity Carnegie was determined that his wealth should be used to encourage people to better themselves – as he had done – and so he bequeathed vast sums of money to libraries and universities. And unlike our rich fool Carnegie saw it as his life's work to get rid of as much wealth as he could before he died. He was an advocate of high taxation on the estates of dead millionaires and he declared that 'a man who dies rich dies disgraced.'

Andrew Carnegie stands therefore as a classic and an inspiring example of the generous benefactor, the extravagant, principled philanthropist and he stands in stark contrast to our rich fool. But I wonder if his example is enough. Can you imagine one of our celebrity footballers declaring that to die rich is to die disgraced? Something deeper, something stronger is surely needed if we are to be liberated from captivity to wealth and consumerism and if we are to be prepared for losing everything in death. We need to talk about more than human duty and responsibility. We need to start talking about God and specifically we need to start talking about grace – which of course is exactly what Jesus does in this passage.

You see, the one thing that is lacking in this man's life is any sense of grace and of gratitude. Yet doubtless his life has been greatly blessed. We are told, after all, that his land produced abundantly and that was no doubt due to a number of factors – hard work and skill, but also good harvests and ripe weather conditions which are beyond our control and initiative. Like Andrew Carnegie this man's wealth was due to a mixture of determination and drive but also luck – or, what we might call in more theological terms, grace. And no wonder Jesus follows this story with his sublime teaching about anxiety about food and clothes and possessions. Here Jesus points to the ravens in the sky who build no barns and yet are fed, and to the lilies of the field whose splendour outshines the most glamorous wardrobes of the rich. And behind the

ravens and the lilies Jesus is trying to direct people to God and the kind of God revealed in the beauty of the world and of nature. What Jesus is telling us is that the whole of life is framed by the God who is the giver, the God of grace, the generous God, the open-handed God from whom we receive. He is pointing away from petty preoccupations about money and consumption and he's directing people to the theatre of God's glory. And if that doesn't put money into perspective, if that doesn't refocus our whole perspective on wealth and loosen our hold on it, nothing else will. And this is the perspective that the rich fool needs to develop. He needs to see God's hand at work in the world. He needs to have his senses opened to the pervasive grace that seasons nature. He needs to be baptised into a sense of gratitude for the wonder and splendour of life that has blessed him so abundantly. And only then will he get his wealth into perspective. Only then will his eyes be opened to the needs of others and to the joy of generosity. And only then will he be ready to let go of it all – and to die well.

Let me close with a story that you'll doubtless hear from me again because I love it. It's told by an American professor and preacher called Fred Craddock who swears it's true – though I'll leave you to decide for yourselves.

Craddock was visiting the home of one of his students, and after dinner the student and his wife excused themselves to put their kids to bed, leaving Fred alone in the living room with the family pet - a large, sleek greyhound.

'That's a full-blooded greyhound there,' the student had told Fred. 'He once raced professionally down in Florida. Then we got him. Great dog with the kids, that greyhound.'

Well, sitting there together in the room, the dog turned to Fred and asked, 'This your first visit to Connecticut?'

'No,' Fred answered. 'I went to school up here a long time ago.'

'Well, I guess you heard. I came up here from Miami,' said the greyhound.

'Oh, yeah, you retired,' Fred said.

'No, is that what they told you?' said the dog. No, no, I didn't retire. I tell you, I spent 10 years as a professional, racing greyhound. That means 10 years of running around that track day after day, seven days a week with others chasing that rabbit. Well, one day, I got up close; I got a good look at that rabbit. It was a fake! I had spent my whole life chasing a fake rabbit! Hey, I didn't retire; I quit!'

I like to think that that dog now spends time watching the birds and sniffing the flowers. That's what the rich fool needed to do. Let those who have ears hear. Amen.