

Address by Bill Pattinson for 31st July 2022 at St David's Church

The Parable of the Rich Fool. 7th Sunday after Trinity.

Talking about money and possessions is never easy, especially concerning one's own finances. After all that is private and none of your business. There is little doubt, however, that we live in a society dependent on money and wealth - it's part of the ethics of capitalism, like it or not. Money matters and causes strong feelings. At the moment, as two candidates vie for the leadership of the Conservative Party and the privilege of being the next Prime Minister, there is much discussion over the "cost of living crisis", the rise in energy and fuel costs and how taxes should be managed. Big questions to which there are no easy answers. Can our faith inform us about how we deal with such problems? Jesus certainly thought that how we handled money, work and possessions was most important in bringing in his Kingdom. Eleven of Jesus' 39 parables deal with money. Indeed 288 verses in the Gospels, that's about 10%, deal with money and wealth.

This morning in our Gospel we hear Jesus' parable of the rich fool - do you know many such people? I often wonder if today's world of sport includes many like this. Male footballers and male golfers especially demand high wages and compete for extravagantly wealthy prizes. This rests uneasily with a "cost of living" crisis. It was, of course, ever thus. Avarice and greed was around in Jesus' time and 600 years previously Aesop's fables told stories of such emotions. I loved telling these fables in school - they were short, always concerning animals and with a good moral - children really enjoyed them. The nearest in meaning of Aesop's fables to the parable of the Rich fool is "The Goose that laid the Golden Egg."

There was once a Countryman who possessed the most wonderful Goose you can imagine, for every day when he visited the nest, the Goose had laid a beautiful, glittering, golden egg. The Countryman took the eggs to market and soon began to get rich. But it was not long before he grew impatient with the Goose because she gave him only a single golden egg a day. He was not getting rich fast enough. Then one day, after he had finished counting his money, the idea came to him that he could get all the golden eggs at once by killing the Goose and cutting it open. But when the deed was done, not a single golden egg did he find, and his precious Goose was dead.

Moral: "Those who have plenty want more and so lose all they have" or "much wants more and loses all."

Jesus knew that money and possessions are ephemeral, transitory, short lived. If your life revolves around acquiring wealth and then more wealth, there will be no room for God - he will be foolishly left out of the reckoning. In our epistle this morning, Paul says in his letter to Colossians, "Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." In our Gospel Reading also, Jesus makes the same point. He has now turned his face to Jerusalem, constantly travelling in that direction towards his death. Crowds follow him. From out of the crowd someone addresses Jesus:

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” As the inheritance laws of that time gave twice as much to the older brother, we can assume this was a younger brother who wished for equal shares. Jesus will have none of this and says to the crowd, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” And then he tells his parable, which can only be found in Luke’s Gospel.

Now I’m not a great lover of rap music, but on the wonderful website engageworship.org there’s the Song of the Foolish Farmer, the first verse of which goes like this:

“There once was a man with a bunch of stuff,

but a bunch of stuff wasn’t nearly enough.

So the man made a plan, he was really chuffed,

a plan to make room for lots more stuff.”

Why does God say to him, “You fool!” Why is he a fool? The farmer is a fool not because he’s wealthy or because he plans for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself and because he thinks he can secure his life with abundant possessions. The fool is materially blessed by God his land producing a rich crop and he plans an early retirement where he can “eat, drink and be merry.” He does not realise that, as he plans, his last day on earth is near. “Eat drink and be merry” is no bad adage, remembering also that “tomorrow you die.” You certainly cannot take it with you, so God asks,

“And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

The meaning of Jesus’ parable is twofold. Firstly don’t hoard for hoarding’s sake. Don’t devote your life to the gathering of wealth. Secondly, and this is the more important, if we are blessed by God with riches it is our responsibility to bless others and to build the Kingdom of God here on earth. And how difficult it is to strive for a life defined by radical generosity rather than a life of comfort and security, but it is in such a way that we will become rich towards God, and God, in his turn, will further bless us. The final verse of five in the rap goes:

“So there once was a man with a bunch of stuff,

but a bunch of stuff wasn’t nearly enough.

And it never is, for the one who loves stuff:

it’s the one who loves God who’s really chuffed.”

So to summarise. Seek the Kingdom above all else. If we are blessed by God, be generous - there’s plenty of opportunity in our present climate. That’s generous with our time and energy as well as with our money. Give to those in need, expecting nothing in return. Lose our lives for God and the Gospel and find true riches. Of course, it’s our choice and it’s far from easy.

Let me leave you with the words of Mary Oliver, the American poet:

“Another morning and I wake with thirst for the goodness I do not have. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.”

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