

St John's and St Stephen's Church, 1<sup>st</sup> August 2010

*Luke 12:13-21 The Rich Fool*

*'Watch out and guard yourselves against 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'*

So, in a village in Palestine, there are these two blokes. Their father had just died and the two men were due to receive their inheritance, according to Jewish tradition. And the custom was that the elder would receive double that of the younger. Of course, the sisters would have received zip, but we'll just park that thought. Just think about that for the moment. Imagine you were that younger brother. Something like this may have even happened to you when you felt passed over, wrongfully ignored as a will was read out. You're angry, aren't you? Outraged that your blooming older brother should get twice as much as you for no other reason than that he was born before you. Wretched man! You can't sleep properly, the injustice of it is before your eyes day and night. You've tried pleading with him, you've spoken to other members of the family but he just laughs, the smug so-and-so, he knows he's onto a winner and he's only got to take what is his. He doesn't care that his younger brother will probably never speak to him again. Ha!

One day, the younger brother finds himself in a crowd of village people, listening to the young Rabbi, Jesus bar Joseph, preaching. His brother is in the crowd too, but nowhere near him, but he can see him skulking in the shade of a tree, keeping out of sight, the rat. This is his moment. Everybody knows Jesus is a good man, a just man, he's bound to support me, I've got right on my side! So, in a pause, he shouts out, *'Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!'* Silence. All attention turns to Jesus. Every person in the crowd knows where the young man is coming from, they've all known the pain that comes from this situation, it's been repeated too many times. What will Jesus say?

*'Man, who made me a judge over you?'* So Jesus refuses to enter into the dispute, declines the invitation to set things right. He challenges the man, what kind of arrogance was it that made you imagine that I will judge your family dispute? Instead, he goes for the jugular: *'Watch out and guard yourselves against 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'* Jesus' focus is not on the externals of the dispute, what can be seen, but at what is behind it, what drives it, what it is that is unseen, festering in the human heart, and it is this: greed. Greed on the part of the older brother for gleefully accepting his double share; greed on the part of the younger man for coveting it.

So dangerous drag Jesus into the equation – you may not like what you hear! Jesus goes on, hammering home the point with this vivid story, a parable designed to show the folly of greed. I bet the younger brother wished he had kept his mouth shut because he's about to get it with both barrels. It's a story rooted in a rural, agrarian economy where many people were farmers and everybody knew everybody else. *'The land of a rich man produced abundantly'* – and everybody in the crowd knew someone like that, a man who had lots of land that always produced a good crop, so different from the scratchings they got from their own paltry patch of land. *'And he thought to himself, what should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'* He thought to himself. He didn't ask anybody else, he didn't discuss what to do with the elders, or his friends because he hadn't any, nor his family because they didn't speak to him any more. He took nobody else into consideration but his own self. With so much food he could have helped the poor, he could have blessed the village, he could have been loved. He chose none of those: *'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'*. It was all about him. Doubtless he wanted to store his grain so that he could command a higher price later on. He is completely isolated in his greed. Did you notice the repetition of 'I' and 'my'? The first person occurs 11 times in this short story. It's all about me. (As an aside, I recently read about a modern rich fool – the fictional John Veals in 'A week in December' by Sebastian Faulks. Good read. Horrible person!!)

Of course, what the man didn't take into account was God. He had locked him out of the picture in the same way that he locked his neighbours out. *'But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is, Jesus concludes, with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God'*

Greed. Ouch. It's an uncomfortable topic because greed infects all of us in some way. Jesus preached about wealth and the desire for it more than about prayer, and certainly far more than about sex. Only the kingdom of God was a bigger topic. Perhaps that is because the desire for more, the worship of wealth, is in fact an alternative kingdom, an idolatry.

Greed, in case you didn't know or had forgotten, is one of the 7 so-called deadly sins. These sins are called deadly because, quote, 'they destroy the life of grace'. It's easy to see how this happened to the rich fool in this parable. A life of grace – beautiful phrase, that – will be marked by generosity, by good relationships with others, by loving and being loved, by freedom, acceptance of oneself and others, by a sense of God, and knowing that we are loved by him. Doesn't that sound good, a life we would all want? But the rich fool had none of that. He had his wealth, and he thought his wealth was enough even for his soul. He thought that it would protect him from troubles to come. In fact he was alone, isolated, cut off from any meaningful relationship with anybody but himself. And he left God out of the picture entirely. But God hadn't left him out of his picture and demanded an accounting from him that very night. St Augustine had this to say: *'the rich farmer was planning to fill his soul with excessive and unnecessary feasting and was proudly disregarding all those empty bellies of the poor. He did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barn.'*

In summary, it's possible to see how greed affects our relationship with God – it puts him out of the picture because we come to trust in what we have to protect us; with other people – it neglects their needs and drives them away; and with ourselves – it destroys our life of grace and leaves us isolated, alone.

You could say that greed is at the root of much evil. Paul says, *'The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil'* (1 Tim 6:10). The desire for more led to the original sin in the garden of Eden, to almost every conflict and war that has ever been, to the downfall of MPs and ministers in our own country, to the huge imbalance in the world between the so-called haves and have-nots, and drives overconsumption of the world's resources.

Greed has many faces. A very rich man was once asked, what would you like now? He replied, 'just a little more'. It's often said that the greediest are those who have the most and there is some truth in that. It's not difficult to think of many modern examples, held up for us in the press to point our fingers at because we're not like that. Or is it that we would like what they have? Is our fascination and contempt driven by our own inner desires? We should be careful to point the finger because greed infects all of us. Greed is the desire for more, more than we need: desire for wealth, certainly; but it also might be for 'stuff' – the latest gadget, clothes, for popularity, for power. Take a moment to think what colour or shape or size your greed is.

Each of the 7 deadly sins has an antidote to the poison, a healing for the disease. For greed it is this: charity. In other words, give. Give! Give what we have – the excess, what we don't need. Give ourselves too, give love and affection so that we're not like the rich fool who was so turned in on himself that he had no meaningful relationships.

We've travelled a long way, from a dusty village in Palestine 2000 years ago where a young man was incensed by the injustice of his elder brother's 'right' to double the inheritance. Jesus put his finger on *greed* as the problem – both the younger and the elder brother's and went on to tell a devastating parable to show the folly of it. I haven't mentioned that the tenth commandment is about greed: *'You shall not covet your neighbour's possessions or his car, nor an excess of riches or things for yourself, you shall not covet another person, to take advantage of them, you shall not covet more stuff'* (Ex 20:17, paraphrase!). It is mentioned as one of the 7 deadly sins. And yet, you know, our culture absolutely *luxuriates* in greed. All advertising is appealing basically to greed. All the offers made to us for more. People talk about 'retail therapy' as something good, to be indulged in rather than recognizing it as simply greed.

Here are Jesus words from this morning. Wisdom is one of my favourite themes in the bible, and here is one of Jesus' great Wisdom sayings to end with. It's on your newsheets and the colouring I gave for the children: *'Watch out and guard yourselves against 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'*. (Lk 12:15)

Richard Croft