

## THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Ecclesiastes 1. 2, 12-14; 2. 18-23

Colossians 3. 1-11

Luke 12. 13-21

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

The rich man in the parable that is given in our gospel text today has benefited from God's goodness and blessing. His land has produced abundantly. The crops are plentiful. The man has undoubtedly prepared for the harvest, but its bounty has exceeded his calculations; and he has no place to store it. The problem is not really the size of the harvest; it is the man's insistence on gathering all of it and storing it up for his own use. The thought of giving it to persons in need never crosses his mind.

This parable allows us to listen in on the musing of this man's mind. In his reverie, he suddenly comes up with a solution. He will tear down his barns and build bigger ones. Then he can gather there all of his grain and his goods. As we read of his plans, we see that they push confidently into the future tense: '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, ...' We cannot help but notice the man's presumption and self-centredness, as they are reflected in the frequency of the possessive pronoun in his thoughts: *my* crops, *my* barns, *my* grain, *my* goods... and finally, *my* soul.

As quickly as the man finds a solution, he also projects the future that he will enjoy: 'And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.' The man's dream of eating, drinking and being merry echoes various references to hedonistic, profligate and Epicurean living.

Notice that the man has shut out everyone else from his life and his thoughts. There is no-one else in the story – just the man and his possessions – until God speaks to him. After envisioning his future, God immediately speaks to declare what the man's future actually holds for him. The reversal could not be sharper. God addresses the man as 'fool'; and makes an announcement about what is to happen 'this very night' rather than over 'many years'. God will demand the man's soul; and in a sense, his possessions will take his very life from him.

As suggestive as this parable is, it does not specifically answer the crucial question, which is: 'What was the rich man's folly?' Actually, his follies are *many* and allow the parable to be viewed from four angles of moral reflection.

The first angle is 'preoccupation with possessions'. Until the voice of God interrupts the fool's reverie, there is nothing in the story but the man and his possessions. His goods and prosperity have become the sole pursuit of his life, until finally the poverty of his abundance is exposed. This parable exposes the emptiness of a purely materialistic lifestyle.

The second angle is 'security in self-sufficiency'. The parable sketches the picture of someone who does not need anyone else. The man can provide for himself, and his provisions will take care of him for many years. He does not need the security of the love of family or friends. He thinks that he can make it on his own and that he does not need anyone else.

The third angle is the 'grasp of greed'. Greed is the moral antithesis of generosity. The thought of what the rich fool might be able to do for those in need never enters his mind. His innermost thoughts reveal that he has no sense of responsibility to use his abundance for the welfare of persons less fortunate than he. Greed has eaten away any compassion he may once have had.

And the fourth angle is the ‘hollowness of hedonism’. The rich fool revels in his prosperity, because he envisions that because of it he can ‘eat, drink and be merry’. His daydream is to spend his future indulging his whims and his desires. The greatest good he can imagine is a life of maximising his own pleasure. Leisure, recreation, freedom from the demands of work – do they really give life meaning?

Our parable finishes with a picture of a man who lays up treasure for himself, but who is not rich in God’s favour. Or, as the text puts it precisely, a man who stores up treasures for himself but who is not ‘rich toward God’.

The phrase ‘rich toward God’ is unusual. What does it mean to be ‘rich toward God’? The meaning is plain from the contrast: it is the opposite of laying up earthly treasure for oneself. Being rich toward God is the opposite of treating the self as though it were made for *things* and not for God. Being rich toward God is the opposite of acting as if life consists in the abundance of possessions and not in the abundance of knowing God.

Being ‘rich toward God’ occurs when the heart is drawn towards God and considers him as our riches. Being rich toward God means counting God as greater riches than anything on earth. And being rich toward God means using earthly riches to show how much we value God. This is what the prosperous farmer failed to do. And the result was that he was a fool and lost his soul.

In reading this parable, it is important for us to remember that the key issue is *not* that the man’s fields prospered. The key issue is that God ceased to be his supreme treasure. If God had been his treasure, what would he have done differently? Instead of saying, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry,’ the man might have said something like,

‘God, this is all yours. You have made my fields prosper. Show me how to express with my riches that you are my treasure, and that the riches are not. I already have enough. I don’t need a bigger and bigger safety net. I don’t need better food, better drink, better parties. I do indeed want to make merry, but not in self-indulgent parties with rich people. I want to make merry with the people who have been helped by my generosity. I want the fullest blessing of giving. Have you not taught me, Lord, that it is ‘more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20. 35)?

The rich fool’s approach to life has been described by one theologian as ‘practical atheism’. Oh yes, the rich fool may protest that he has always believed in God, but when it came to managing his life, dealing with his possessions and planning for the future, he lived as though there were no God. This parable therefore probes our basic commitments. What difference does our faith in God make in the practical matters of life?

I am reminded of a news programme that I watched several years ago during the summer. As often happens during the hot summer months, brush fires had started up in America, and specifically in the Santa Ana region of California. The television reporter was interviewing a man who had lost his house and all of his possessions. The man was obviously shocked and surprised. But as the interview continued, he confessed to the reporter that his brother had recently reminded him that they should not allow their possessions *to possess them*; and after a few moments of silence, the man looked at the reporter and announced, ‘I guess I’m a free man, now.’

Amen.