

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.

Karl Lagerfeld, the German creative director of Chanel (the world-renowned French fashion house specialising in *haute couture* and ready-to-wear clothes) died last February at the age of eighty-five. Lagerfeld was not the type of man to leave anything up to chance. Well before his death, the designer had told everyone that he wanted to leave his multi-million pound fortune to ‘Choupette’, his favourite cat. However, French law does not allow a person to leave his or her estate to an animal. Lagerfeld therefore arranged for a foundation to be created, whose sole responsibility would be to ensure that Choupette continues to live in the lifestyle to which she was accustomed. Following the stipulations of the designer’s will, two of his former employees now live in a sumptuous house, receive generous salaries and continue to take care of the cat as they always did. Even before Lagerfeld’s passing, these two women (who by the way are called Françoise and Marjorie) were given the responsibility of feeding Choupette, reading her stories, and keeping a record of all of her daily activities.

I imagine that those who are members of Lagerfeld’s family and those who were his close friends and colleagues found Choupette’s legacy to be a bit of a shock. Surely Karl could have done something else with his money?

Our reading from the gospel of St Luke tells the story of another disgruntled inheritor. This time, it is a son; and he has yet to receive his rightful inheritance from his father. Apparently, the man’s older brother refused to give him what he was due.

The Jewish law of inheritance stipulated that the elder brother would receive a double portion of the inheritance,¹ and that the rest should be divided amongst the other sons. If the father had no sons, his possessions were to be divided among his daughters,² but his daughters were then required to marry within the father's tribe so that his possessions would not leave the tribe.³

Our Lord ignores the son's request for help and refuses to be the judge or divider of inheritances. In fact, Jesus rejects the son's request because he will not participate in satisfying the greed that he senses has prompted it. Instead of helping the son to get his inheritance, Christ points him to a different understanding of life. One may gain the whole world, and still lose one's soul;⁴ and this is clearly illustrated in what is called the Parable of the Rich Fool.

The point of our Lord's parable seems simple and straightforward enough. We are not let greed take us over. If we do so, it will become our goal in life. If we give greed free reign, it will become the god we serve. We are to understand that our lives are not measured by how much stuff we have; we are not to be possessed by our possessions.

It is a fairly simple concept, isn't it? Then why is it so hard for us to learn?

A clue may be found in looking closely at the text. The Greek word used here for 'fool' is 'aphron'. It comes from the Greek word 'phrones', which means 'mind' or 'thought'. Putting the 'a' or 'alpha' in front of the word forms a negative. If 'phrones' means 'mind' or 'thought', 'aphron' means 'no mind, no thought'.

This rich farmer is a fool because he gives no mind to God and has literally no thought of God. A fool is one who never thinks about God, who never considers

¹ Cf. Deut 21. 17.

² Cf. Num 27. 1-11.

³ Cf. Num 36. 7-9.

⁴ Cf. Lk 9. 25.

that God is the giver of all good things, who has no desire to repay God for his bounty by sharing it with others. A fool builds bigger barns for crops that will decay and come to nothingness.

When Luke recounts one of Jesus' parables, he likes to tell us the point of the story at the beginning. This time he does it by recording what Christ said. The point is pure and simple, and it is given in verse 15: 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions.' The greatest failure in life is the failure to see the distinction between what we have and *what we do with what we have* and *who we are*.

We will all have a time when we will be asked whether we were 'rich toward God'. Wealth may indeed be a sign of God's goodness and blessing, but it is to be used prudently. Our material abundance (which after all is a sign of God's faithfulness) should lead us to show similar faithfulness and to make provisions for the whole community, including those who are in need.

What do you think that means, in practical terms? Every day (and sometimes every hour) you and I have the opportunity to indulge in greed, or not. How much 'wealth' (and we *are* wealthy, compared to other peoples and countries in the world) are we to keep? And how much wealth are we to give away?

It is not a very comfortable question to ask; and I cannot give you the precise answer. The answer will vary, depending upon our circumstances and conditions. But God can give that answer; and he will. And if we are willing, he will help us to avoid falling into the trap of the rich fool.

In the Parable of the Rich Fool, we who are readers of the gospel are privy to the man's inner thoughts. He says to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and

there I will store all my grain and goods.’ The thought of giving to persons in need never crosses his mind. 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.

As the parable ends, we have a picture of a man who lays up treasure for himself, but who is not rich in God’s favour. The implication is that the pursuit of abundant possessions and the pursuit of God’s favour are antithetical and mutually exclusive. Here, there is no ‘both/and’. The story therefore exposes our own inner commitments as clearly as it exposes the thoughts of the rich fool. It holds up a mirror before us and asks us to take a good look at our own inner lives and to listen to our own inner voices.

As we think about possessions, our attachment to them and our willingness (or lack thereof) to share what we have, there is one final question that can be asked. And this question, if we answer it positively, might just change our whole perspective on what God requires of us.

Yes, we will all have a time when we will be asked whether we were ‘rich toward God’; but better yet, we will all have a time when we will be asked whether we allowed God to be *rich toward us*. If we will just try this as an experiment, if we allow God to be rich towards us, it will change our lives and outlook. What experience have we of the wealth of God?

Amen.