

Sunday between 31<sup>st</sup> July and 6<sup>th</sup> August [18]

Luke 12:13-21

Our gospel reading is the beginning of a portion of Jesus' teaching on the risks of wealth and greed. The parable within the reading we heard today centres around a person who had become rich due to an unexpectedly large harvest. His response to this good fortune was to take care of his own needs, to build bigger barns, to store his grain and to plan a life of leisure going forward because he would no longer need to worry about anything, he could eat, drink and be merry. But the twist in the story meant that the life planned by this man was to be short lived and in fact he wouldn't have a chance to enjoy his riches. Jesus warns his followers that the same fate awaits those who store up treasure on earth but are not rich towards God.

But what has this man in the parable making a good living have to do with his relationship with God? Surely he can have some wealth put aside and make plans for a comfortable retirement without jeopardising his relationship with God? If not, what hope is there for any of us who are prudent and self-sufficient with our savings?

Part of the answer lies in the question Jesus was attempting to address. The parable was in response to a man who had asked Jesus to tell his brother to share the family inheritance with him. The request in itself doesn't seem to be too unreasonable; he wasn't asking for the whole inheritance for himself, just a share and Jesus often spoke about sharing and generosity. But, Jesus is also very clear in his teaching that intention is key in our relationship with God. The generosity and sharing that Jesus preaches is about us choosing to care for our neighbour, not imposing our choices on someone else. Jesus could see quite clearly that the man who was looking for a share in the inheritance was not seeking justice, rather he was seeking personal gain.

So it was for the man in the parable, his good fortune and the wealth that followed was going to be used not for the good of others, but rather in a selfish way to make his life easier. But that still doesn't answer the question, why does such behaviour show a disregard for God, why can't either of the men keep their wealth and their self-sufficient attitude and honour God?

The real answer lies in the understanding of the 2 great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Those two commandments are inextricably linked, our love of God is lived out through our relationship with our neighbour and our response to our neighbour is as a direct result of the grace we have received from God. Jesus knew very well that the fruits of the spirit do not include greed and self-sufficiency, so where those things are prevalent, the person has some work to do regarding their relationship with God.

When we come into relationship with God, which we do by prayer and reading scripture, we come to understand the good news that we are wonderfully made in God's image and despite our failings and frailties, we are loved, unconditionally and completely as we are. That sort of understanding cannot fail to transform our lives if we've really come to believe it. When we know that we are loved by God completely, we dare not treat ourselves with contempt because that would be treating someone beloved of God with contempt. When we know that we are loved by God we can let go of the worry that comes from our futile attempts at controlling our futures because the God who loves us will not fail us. So a relationship with God will encourage in us a trust and faith that allow us to relax about how we will live.

But it is not just our relationship with God which is transformed, the effects of grace flow, naturally and necessarily into our relationships with other people. If God loves us completely and unconditionally, how can we imagine that God loves those around us any less or differently? So, our dealings with these other people who are precious in God's sight must be loving and generous if we are to recognise the worth that God has recognised in them. It is completely impossible to love our neighbours as ourselves and to be self-centred and greedy

with our wealth and resources. The world's encouragement for us to look after ourselves is at complete odds with God's call to love our neighbour.

So what does this mean practically for us? Do we all have to hand over our wealth if we are to have any ability to be rich towards God? Jesus' words at the end of the parable are these, "so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God". Jesus could have said, "so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves" and left it there, but he didn't. It is not the treasures that are the issue, rather it is the attitude and intention that affects our relationship with God.

Once our intentions and attitude toward God are right, which comes from an ever growing and deepening relationship through prayer, study and worship, our actions will necessarily follow suit. It is as simple and as difficult as that. The theory looks straightforward, but the practice is far more challenging. Our human nature struggles to really believe that we are acceptable to God as we are, and we often struggle to accept that some other people meet the grade too. We try to love our neighbours as ourselves, but we don't always do a great job of being loving and kind to ourselves. Far better, in many ways, to love our neighbour as Jesus loves us particularly for those of us to struggle to be kind to ourselves.

Being rich towards God, then, is about putting that relationship first. God calls us into a relationship of love where we can trust God, enjoy grace, experience joy and live transformed lives. When we worry about the future, which we all do from time to time, we are invited to bring those concerns to God. When we fail to trust God's providence, we can come back in prayer and try again. When we let down our neighbour because of our own greed or ambition, we can, but grace, received God's forgiveness and start afresh. But we can only have the courage to approach God if we are already in relationship with God. We need to give time, priority, focus and energy to our relationship with God, from there we need not worry, God will become our greatest treasure and all will be well.