

Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Pentecost 11 – Wesley Uniting 10.30am Worship – 31st July 2016

Theme: 'The deluded rich person'

Reading: Luke 12:13-21 'The parable of the rich fool'

Text: "But God said to the rich man, 'You Fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God." Luke 12:20/21

Introduction

Recently we have been seeing a financial advisor, looking to the future and just maybe thinking of retiring in a few years' time. All very speculative, but trying to do a bit of forward planning.

Let me give you a fictitious account of a meeting with our financial advisor that seems to suit today's Gospel reading or at least is a little of a personal challenge to what is said there.

'It's one thing to accumulate your super and other money,' said the financial advisor as he settled back in his ample leather office chair, 'It's another thing to keep it!' The irony of his statement wasn't lost on me. Here we were, paying for the advisor's advice on 'how to wisely manage our finances so we had enough to retire on,' when in reality we were not securing a safe future for ourselves at all.

That fact came home to me in the next financial advisor's comment. He whipped out his actuarial chart and said authoritatively, 'According to our estimates, some-one like you should live two decades more, barring some unforeseen, unfortunate accident or disease. I have your death at about 83.'" These guys not only know how to invest our super but also determine when we die – all a little frightening and too confronting!!

In a way, that speculation was the wisest thing the man said in our session. Whether the span of my life is 63, 73, 83 or more isn't up to me or my financial advisor. Isn't it ironic that I sat there carefully planning my financial future, getting expert advice, attempting to gain control over my future finances, when over all that hangs death, the ultimate 'out-of-control' experience.

Behind all this planning and deliberating, strategizing and advice seeking, stands the spectre that makes much of my wisdom look foolish. – makes ridiculous the self-satisfied moments when I say to myself, as did the rich fool in today's parable:

'I have plenty of good things laid up for many years. I'll take life easy: eat, drink and be merry.'" Luke 12:19

Suddenly this parable of Jesus entered the reality of my life in a very real way, challenging me to look afresh at my faith, my priorities and my future from a God perspective and not my perspective – very confronting!!

Let's look at the Gospel passage

The context of the parable is a response to a question from some-one in the crowd. 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.'

It was a common occurrence to ask the Rabbi for guidance on a range of personal matters and this still happens to this very day! Jesus answers the man's question, not with a direct answer, but with this parable, which questions motive, intent and where is 'the heart' in all this. Jesus raises the broader issue of 'greed' in his response and the parable flows from Jesus' words in vs 15:

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;
a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

In a sense Jesus doesn't directly answer the question but rather challenges the motive behind the question and lays the foundation for teaching the disciples about 'worldly goods' that follows in Luke 12:22-48.

But for today let us look at the set parable. We call this parable, 'the parable of the rich fool,' but Jesus doesn't. Jesus begins the story not with talk about the man but with talk about the land and its bounty. 'A certain rich man's land produced a bountiful crop.' The man's miraculous, barn bursting harvest is a gift. An amazing gift! However, the rich man, immediately in his mind, transforms the gift into personal achievement and has a quandary to which he finds his personal solution.

How do I manage God's gifts so that they become my secured possessions?
'Here's what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That's where I'll store all my grain and my goods. I'll say to myself, 'You have stored up plenty of goods for years to come. Now I'll take it easy! Eat, drink and enjoy myself.'" (vss 18/9)

And this little charade, this self-delusional game, might have gone fine were it not for the intrusive voice of God. Note that the voice of God doesn't accuse the rich man of injustice, immorality or even greed. Rather he simply calls him a 'fool'. Why in the parable did God call him a fool?

'Then who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?' (vs 20b) CEV
The 'things' the rich man so prudently managed and secured so that he could enjoy life are ripped away by his death. The story ends with the question; 'Whose things are they now?' The man who thought he had so many things discovers, too late, that his 'things' had him!

Reflections for ourselves on this passage

In a death-denying society and culture it's so easy for us to become deluded, to look upon our lives as our property, to attempt to manage and control our future as if our future is totally in our hands and to have an exaggerated sense of our own power and direction.

Then we come to church. Jesus tells us a little story, and perhaps we hear a voice, a voice from outside, that intrusive voice of God, of the truth: 'Now who will get the things that you have prepared for yourself?'

Suddenly the reality of life and death is squarely put in front of us and we are called afresh to see that what we have is a gift from God.

Our lives, our possessions, our relationships and even the world we live in, are all gifts and not ours to control. Rather they are gifts to be shared and cared for in a variety of ways. We don't own or control ultimately anything we have.

The Lord is the giver of life, the true owner of all we have.

I came across this fascinating story that I've changed a fraction to make it more contemporary to our situation.

"The setting is from the original 'Jaws' movie where the marine biologist arrives from Woods Hole. In a desperate attempt to find out what's causing the shark problem in the area, they capture a large shark and proceed to do an autopsy of it. In the shark's belly they find a mixture of items including many fish, as expected, and then unexpected things like a blender, a car licence plate and assorted bits and pieces scavenged by the shark.

The shark really is an 'eating machine' devouring a host of items, indiscriminately eating and consuming everything in sight.

My priest friend tells me this is a modern day parable. We consume everything in sight, quite indiscriminately. We have deep, vast hungers as a society. We attempt to satisfy them in a myriad of ways. However they are indiscriminately satisfied.

He goes on to suggest that perhaps the vocation of the contemporary church is not simply to meet people's needs or to satisfy their hungers but to give them food worth having, to school them about how to be hungry in the right sort of way."

This is in line with Jesus' words at the end of the parable from Luke 12: 20/21 paraphrased as "You are a fool if you store up things for yourself but are not rich towards God."

Here we have the crux of the passage. So easily our possessions can get in the way of our relationship with God through Christ our Lord.

The man in the parable and people who emulate his pattern of life are like fools for leading isolated, self-absorbed lives, because everything they have acquired unto themselves ends with death. Life is not had by the possessions we have. Life and possessions are a gift of God to be used to advance God's agenda of care and compassion, precisely for those who lack resources to provide for themselves. This is the gospel for today. Praise be to God.

Let us pray.

Gracious God,

You have blessed us with our families, homes, our jobs, friends and possessions. All this has come from you and we acknowledge that. We also confess our tendency to treat these things as if they were our own, as if the world was ours to manage and manipulate as we please rather than an amazing gift entrusted to us. Forgive us our foolish forgetfulness. Remind us during today's time of worship of the fragility of our existence, of our utter dependence not upon our own prudence and calculation, but rather upon your love and grace.

This we pray in the name of our Lord Jesus, who had nothing to call his own, who stored up nothing for himself – Jesus, whose only desire was to do your will in all things. Amen.