

Sermon for Sunday 31 July 2022 – The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14; 2.18-23; Colossians 3.1-11; Luke 12.13-21

Let us pray. Father, by your Holy Spirit, would you open your word to our hearts and minds. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated.

We just heard Paul writing to the young Church, 'So if you have been raised with Christ, see the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God; set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.'

Now, as I've prepared this, I know that I'm in danger of making the rookie pure mistake of trying to include too much. But bear with me, there is so much in our Gospel passage today that we could look at. We've skipped over from last week to this week, a whole section of Luke's Gospel. It's worth going back and reading it. I don't know why the lectionary setters skip over it; maybe because it's controversial. Jesus pronounces; he really has some strong things to say about the religious leaders; at one point he pronounces three rows over, he's calling them hypocrites.

And then lawyers who are versed in the Torah, the Jewish teachings, come and say, 'When you say these things, to the Pharisees, you insult us too.' And Jesus doesn't say, 'I'm really sorry about that', he says, 'too right!' Woe to you lawyers also; and he warns the disciples to avoid the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. There's no gentle Jesus meek and mild.

And against that background, somebody calls out from the crowd, or comes to him from the crowd, and we have this man asking Jesus to get involved in a family dispute - reminiscent of Mary and Martha a couple of weeks ago, 'Jesus, I'm not happy with my sister. You sort it out.' Here we've got a man coming and saying, 'I'm not happy with my brother.'

Now what? I'm going to ask a question; I'd love to hear the answer - if we're going to come to a parable like this, and a story like this, what have we got to think of first? As my New Testament tutor used to say, **context**. What did the people in the first century who were around Jesus and hearing Jesus speak, what would they have thought of this? What would it have meant to them in the first century before we try and apply it to the 21st century? It's quite normal for people to approach rabbis like this to ask for clarification of the law or to get involved in a dispute. The rabbis knew the Torah, they knew what it said, they knew how to apply it or should have done.

And we have a man whose father has died. We know this because he's asking to get his share of the inheritance. The Law allowed the older brother to have a double amount of his younger brothers. In those days, it was only the males who inherited; the double portion coming with a responsibility to provide for

the widowed mother, for the sisters who were yet to be married, and so on. And the older brother had to agree if the inheritance was going to be split.

So here we have this man; we assume that the brother is saying no and this younger brother is saying, 'I want my share.' Now, to our 21st century minds, that may not seem to be much of a problem. We are used to living individually in families, and when we inherit, if we have siblings and the will says that the inheritance is going to be shared out, you expect the executors to share it out.

You get your share and you crack on with life. Life is good. But in this context, particularly with subsistence farming and owning some land, to split the inheritance and take your share would dilute the wealth of the family. So the usual, the cultural convention, was to keep the inheritance together, keep the estate moving through the generations, and live as family communally, with communal responsibility, not individualistically. Does that make sense so far? It's very important that we understand why this coming and asking for the splitting of the inheritance was countercultural. People hearing this man come to Jesus would be going, 'What? You want to take your share out of the family and be self-sufficient?' And Jesus is having none of it. Our translation doesn't do it justice. It says, 'Friend, who made me judge?' It's 'man', it's harsh, it's 'Hey man', as the Americans might say, 'Hey, man, who made me judge or arbiter over you.' Again, that reminiscence of Mary and Martha, and Jesus doesn't get involved. Jesus warns the crowd on the back of this about their attitude towards possessions.

It may surprise you. Let me ask you the question, does Jesus speak more about heaven, hell or money and wealth across the Gospels? Money and wealth; so I guess he thinks it's quite important. And we then get this parable of the rich man and his barns. So what can this parable say to us this morning?

Some points... The rich man is financially secure. He's not a subsistent peasant farmer. The land has produced the crop. You notice the words, the **land** produced the crop abundantly. It doesn't talk about the man working hard like a subsistence farmer to produce the crop, the **land** produced it.

And the man then has a conversation with himself. Soliloquy. These are always, generally, negative in Luke's gospel. Think of the parable of the prodigal son; he gets to the end of his tether and he comes to himself and says - you have to wonder there, if he hadn't got to the end of his resources, would he have come to himself and decided to go back to the family home? Luke always has this negative aspect when somebody comes to talk to themselves. I wonder whether it's where we get the origins of the first sign of madness, I don't know. This man maybe can only talk to himself about this because his wealth has alienated him from others. He doesn't have folk to bounce ideas off as would be normal within a communal situation.

His conversation with himself is littered with I, me, mine. Again, Mary and Martha, my sister, leading **me** to do all the work. Here's a man who's saying, my goods, my wealth. Again, it's in the negative. He doesn't acknowledge God. We know this because God calls him a fool. And what does the psalmist say about false fools? Fools say there is no God.

One of the reasons I say it's important that we really know a good overview of scripture when we see, God says, 'And you fool.' Echoes of the psalmist, 'The fool says there is no God.' He's not taking God into account. And the rich man is going to hoard his wealth, his crops and his possessions. Now, there is nothing wrong with appreciating the good gifts that we get from God. But that's not the same as hoarding. That's not the same as keeping anything in excess of our basic needs for ourselves. What do we say? We'll be saying it shortly in the Eucharistic prayer, before the Eucharistic, 'all things come from you and of your own do we give you,' not, of **ours**, do we give you God; of your **own**. But the rich man wasn't saying this; his conversation with himself, as I say, was me, mine.

My friends, forgive me if I'm a bit blunt here, but what is my attitude? What is your attitude? What is our attitude to money and possessions? Is it that it's ours, we've worked for it, we've earned it, we've invested it, we've stored it up? Or is it that what we have comes as a result of God's generosity towards us and that we are stewards of it with the responsibilities that that brings? Do we think of our wealth as individual, as this young man seeking his inheritance did? Or do we think of it as communal as he would have been better doing?

Now, let's get practical. For those of you who are visiting this morning, I apologise, you may be able to take this back to your home situation, but I'm going to be very practical and very direct this morning. How do we think about our disposable income, over and above what we need for our basic needs? Now, I know there may be some here this morning whose material income may only just, or may not even meet basic needs. You may be on a fixed income and in the current situation you're struggling. If that's you, come and talk to me afterwards in private; let us help you. But if that's not you, how do you think about your disposable income? Do you think, oh, I've got a bit extra, I could have an extra meal out, I could have an extra holiday? Or do you see it as a resource that you can contribute to communal wellbeing; to the ministry of the church as we seek to do mission and ministry; to the poor, be that via the church or be it directly through other organisations.

And I'm going to get even more practical now in respect of the ministry here in Laudanum and Preston St Mary. Part of enabling ministry of mission to happen is that we pay our parish share to the diocese and out of that we get the ministry of clergy, of readers, our training; we get the resources of the diocesan office. We may sometimes debate about how that money is spent; I think we're in a diocese that is really looking very carefully at how they spend their money. I've got a lot of respect for our Board of Finance, but currently the last figures given to PCC by our treasurer is that our giving as a congregation only pays 60% of our Parish Share; and that's without all the other bills that go to keep the building standing, before we even think about doing ministry and mission or giving to the needs of others. We make up the difference with other income streams, and that's not a bad thing. And I know folks here who give generously.

But can I challenge us all this morning to think about our attitude to the resources that we have? Maybe for some of us that will need a change of thinking from 'this is mine, what bit of it do I think I'm going to give' to 'I am a steward of these resources and above my basic needs, how is it best used? How is that surplus to be used?'

And don't hear me saying, I'm begging you to give more simply because we've got a parish share to pay. I want to encourage you to be good stewards with what you've been trusted by our Heavenly Father to use them wisely, not inappropriately, or to hoard them. Now, you might legitimately reply, well, Graham, 'What if I give away my surplus? What happens if something unexpected happens and I've given away the money that could have paid for it? Well, again, I don't know why the lectionary setters have done this, but they stop where we've stopped today.

But Jesus goes on; he turns to his disciples and says, 'having taught the parable and given a warning about possessions, therefore...' I was always taught to pay particular attention when there's a therefore, pay attention to what's gone before and pay attention to what is coming afterwards. Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food and the body more than clothing.

And the end of that section he says, 'do not strive for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying.' The nations strive for this, ie those who are not part of the people of God, instead strive for God's kingdom and all these other things will be given to you as well.

The rich fool was all about himself, his wealth and his possessions. He didn't take God into account. That night, he lost his life not knowing who would inherit his state. Friends, can I encourage you this morning; we have a Heavenly Father who cares about us, who loves us, who knows what we need, who gives us the stewardship of resources. But with that stewardship comes responsibility to use them wisely and for the kingdom. Amen.