

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 12.13-21)

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This passage from Luke's gospel is entitled, at least in the NRSV, 'The Parable of the Rich Fool'. It seems a little harsh. Isn't the rich man in Jesus' tale simply taking reasonable measures to sustain his life into the future, ensuring that he doesn't become a burden on his children or the welfare state? And why, in any case, does the question from the voice in the crowd prompt Jesus to tell *this* story? 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me' sounds like an appeal for justice and fairness. To have this appeal met by, first, a refusal to engage: 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you', and then, second, an imputation of foolish greed seems an unexpectedly perverse response from Jesus.

Well, I think it fundamentally is perverse, a subversion of how we normally think it prudent to go about life. But how that is so is worth pondering in a bit more depth. Let's start with some features of the parable Jesus tells.

It is striking how insistent in the story, are the pronouns 'I' and 'my', and the entirely self-referencing nature of the rich man's thought. 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly', Jesus says, and he *thought to himself*, 'What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store **my** crops?' Then he said, '*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'. My crops, my barns, my grain, my goods. What should I do with them all, I ask myself?

And then comes an even more striking assertion of ownership, possession, from the rich man. ‘I will say to *my* soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry’. Such largesse! Such assurance! The word ‘soul’ here is the Greek ‘psyche’, which can also be translated as inner life, personhood, self. What is striking is that the man in Jesus’ parable relates in some sense to his own life, his own ‘soul’, as *his* possession – yet paradoxically that purported self-possession actually distances him from himself. ‘I will say to my soul, Soul’ – addressing himself as if he were someone else. So who is the ‘I’ who is speaking? Who is this ‘I’ who thinks he can guarantee his soul’s life for many years, as the sovereign master of his own fate? How deluded can you be? ‘God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ Whose will they be – ‘my goods, my barns, my soul’ – when the illusory self-maintaining ‘I’ is swallowed by death? As Jesus tells the story, the rich man’s securing of his possessions is related to an attempt to secure *himself*, to buttress his very self against vulnerability, loss, and ultimately death. And it is this attempt, Jesus points out, that is ultimately illusory and futile, a foolish dream.

So now it makes more sense that Jesus should tell this story when he does. ‘Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me”’. The presenting issue is the fair distribution of property, and Jesus makes no comment on the justice of the claim. But the deeper issue is how our lives may be enmeshed in the pursuit of illusory security and guarantee, even when we may be ‘in the right’ – and Jesus uses this call from the crowd as a ‘teachable moment’: ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’. Your possessions, including your self-possession, are not the source of your life, but God is. Do not seek to store up possessions, but be ‘rich toward God’. And this brings us, I think, to the perverseness, the subversion that is at the heart of the gospel and of contemplative prayer.

We can live divided lives – and, left to our own devices, we do. Divided from ourselves (the rich man from his soul), divided from God, divided from others – with threat and competition for scarce resources deeply if implicitly shaping our lives. Or, we can live reconciled – at home with ourselves in all our vulnerability, need and imperfection; at home with God as the trustworthy source of our lives; at home with each other – not threatened and competitive, but accepting and peaceable.

Grasping after possessions of whatever kind – goods, reputation, fame, relationships, piety – is the usual way we try to move from the experience of dividedness and fear to the experience of being reconciled and at home. It is how we try to change our experience of scarcity, threatenedness, and insecurity to one of abundance, belonging and security. And it never works. It is always self-defeating – because the way of grasping comes out of and perpetuates the very fear and dividedness it seeks to overcome.

The only real salvation, the only real route to coming home, is by stepping out of the whole dynamic – letting go the false attempt to secure ourselves by what we have, entrusting ourselves to the promise that we need not live like that, and then discovering for ourselves that the promise is trustworthy. And this is the way that Jesus is always trying to open up for us – live by trust and not distrust, dispossession not possession, God-dependence not self-dependence. This is the way to life and the freedom really to be and to love. This is undividedness, singleness or purity of heart. This is the kingdom of heaven.

But what does this mean in practice? What does it mean for the prudent management of our resources and our retirement incomes, and so on?

The major issue is not the *fact* of our possessions (of whatever sort) but our relationship to them – our attachment to them as the ground and guarantee of our

lives. Someone could give up all their material possessions, and yet find themselves just as possessive of their supposed spiritual riches, self-dependent on their non-worldly goods. St John of the Cross warned about spiritual possessiveness as a particularly pernicious form of being foolishly rich.

On the other hand, we should be wary of too quickly de-coupling the inner and the outer here. The very solidity of our material goods keeps tempting us to rest our security in them. The practice of non-attachment need not be crudely literal, and I personally have no intention of selling all that I have and moving under a bridge. But we need to be aware of the perennial dangers of the pursuit of riches and security apart from God. Jesus does not say to the voice in the crowd, ‘don’t claim your rightful inheritance’, but he does say, ‘Be on your guard’. Don’t get sucked too completely into that game.

Our lives are gift through and through, and all our lives we are moving towards the moment of our ultimate self-dispossession, the moment when we realise we can do nothing to ‘add one hour to the span of our life’. What Jesus teaches us is that we live fully only if we know this, only if we receive ourselves as gift and entrust ourselves all our lives not to our goods and barns, but to God’s grace and provision. This does not mean we cannot plan or save; it does mean that all our prudence and reasonableness must be rightly placed, referencing God’s possession of us first of all, not our supposed possession of ourselves. And we practice entrusting ourselves, we practice self-dispossession, each time we sit down and hand ourselves over in prayer. So our prayer prepares us for, indeed it is, a kind of dying in advance – it is a dying that leads to life, and life in abundance.