

Trinity 10 The Rich Fool: inherit and invest to serve the common good

The story of the rich fool opens with a discussion about inheritance. We know from the story of the prodigal son that a father could prematurely grant inheritance to a son. In the laws of inheritance in the book of Numbers (Ch 27 vv. 8-11) it states that, on death, an inheritance passes to sons if there are any, then to daughters if there are no sons, then if there are no children at all, the inheritance is shared by the brothers of the deceased – if there are no brothers either, it is shared between the deceased's father's brothers, and if there are none of them, it goes to the nearest kinsman! In our gospel passage today, it appears we have a brother in one of the generations - we can't tell which – who has a claim to a share but whose other brother is somehow failing to distribute it or share it out as custom demands; “teacher”, says the man, “tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But perhaps because of family politics, or just wise judgement, Jesus declines to get involved; “friend, who set me up to be judge or arbitrator over you?”..... Another feature of Hebrew inheritance (Deuteronomy Ch 21 v.17) was that the elder brother should always get a double share in any inheritance i.e. twice as much as all other brothers. Thinking back to the story of the prodigal son, it is interesting to note that despite knowing that he will get twice as much as his younger brother, the elder brother in the story still gets jealous of his father's love for the prodigal. This just reminds us of how deep the undercurrents in familial relationships can be, especially when money or property is involved. And we can quickly see that in matters of inheritance, there is much to be gained by there being an objective protocol that everyone subscribes to, which goes some way at least towards moderating expectations and calming potential reactions.

What is most interesting to us here, of course, is that the story of the rich fool is inextricably linked to this conversation about inheritance between the brother and Jesus, because the parable is essentially a response to

the issues being raised in the conversation. So, before telling the parable Jesus says to everyone present, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in abundance of possessions.” He then proceeds to tell the parable and go to the heart of the matter over this particular area of human frailty– namely the sometimes insatiable desire for abundance of possessions, property, investments or extra cash i.e. greed! In one form or another, the acquiring or ownership of abundance of possessions is something that can get its hooks into us all too easily – and keep them there. We read on with caution, because this parable surely speaks to each one of us!....

One of the features of the passage is the apparently anxious way that the brother approaches Jesus in the first place, wanting Jesus to intervene so he can get what he thinks he is entitled to. For hovering around the pitfalls of acquisitiveness, there are many emotional or emotive reactions that can run quite deep – one is the fear or anxiety of being overlooked, or of someone else being preferred (i.e. the other brother), which we can probably identify as the first rumblings of jealousy (we think also of the prodigal and his brother): another is the feeling of entitlement, which is most likely greed dressed up as entitlement. The thing that both reactions have in common is that they expose an unsatisfied inner craving or sense of deficit, that has not been met, and is still seeking satisfaction, gnawing away at the sense of self. The jealous person doesn’t just want to be loved but to be preferred. The issue of inheritance brings this to the surface superbly. The focus from Jesus, however, is primarily on greed and acquisitiveness as such. Luke will come back, as we have observed, to the matter of jealousy later in the narrative.

The rich fool is a good pointer towards the multiple ways in the rich western world in which we store up for ourselves treasures on earth – where of course rust and moth can consume and thieves break in and steal (Matthew 6 v.19) but this we choose usually to ignore, until it happens to us.... The opening of the parable sets out what a blessing the rich man’s life is to him for his land “produced abundantly”. His response

to this blessing, however, is self-centred rather than thankful, outward and generous. Instead of this being an opportunity to provide a feast to which all are invited, i.e. to invest to the benefit of others, it is an opportunity to acquire and invest for personal gain. This of course is a dilemma faced by every business, certainly if reasonably successful – how to invest one’s assets, and indeed surpluses, wisely, so that more people can benefit from the outputs of the business and how to reward all who have worked hard to achieve business success. Yet the former can so easily degenerate into squeezing customers to maximise margins and the latter into the board choosing to line the pockets of directors without warrant. There would appear to be little wrong in principle with buying bigger barns per se, this could be a good business investment, but rather, it is the purpose towards these bigger barns are being built that is the issue. In the case of the rich man, it was to “store all my grain and my goods,” so that the man can say to himself, “I have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” The tone of the parable is I think unmistakably that this investment is self-centred and self-serving and therefore bad both socially and economically – we hear nothing of any benefits to his workforce nor any other social benefits. And because it is self-serving, it is therefore going to also be spiritually damaging.

In the light of this discussion about bigger barns and investing in the future, it’s interesting to reflect on the decision by the government this week to suspend the signing of a contract to build a new nuclear reactor at Hinckley Point in Somerset to be built by Edf Energy. A little bit like the HS2 project, there are questions to be asked as to whether the public good is really a public good, or are these projects sometimes riskily opportunistic and self-serving, or an opportunity for a national or regional feel-good factor providing political capital to those who may need it or an opportunity for investors and corporates to get fatter while the rest of us are powerless to influence them? In truth it probably isn’t a case of either/or but about how to balance different interests. And in relation to Edf there are some very significant political dynamics which from a national perspective we don’t want to get wrong. It would be a great

shame if the opportunity for the strengthening of Anglo-French ties and Anglo-Chinese ties were to be wasted, and yet this can't be at the expense of squandering public funds i.e. the nation's inheritance!

One of the things that stands out in our passage of scripture is that in matters of property, possessions and money – as well as there being some key moral absolutes: that you cannot serve God and money and that the kingdom is about the lifting up of the poor and the bringing down of the mighty – often it's about *how* assets are handled. And this is surely the case with inheritances. As we have observed, from a social and economic perspective, inheritance is for the most part a good thing. It may be charged with all sorts of familial or personal emotions but, at base, it provides for financial security for dependents and the scope for meaningful future planning for those who will inherit. Also, as we know well from a church perspective, legacies provoke a wonderful sense of blessing and gifting, reminding us of how much the donor meant to us and we to them. And in the last month we have been delighted to receive a generous bequest from Mollie Martineau's estate for which we are profoundly grateful. What matters in the matter of inheritance is that this perspective of being blessed in abundance and responding with gratitude will issue in the gift being used to serve the wider good. Yet, as the parable suggests, where less worthy instincts prevail, inheritance can be fraught with dangers and will almost certainly expose and exploit our lower instincts, and spoil, indeed squander, the sense of blessing. Whether there's enough in an inheritance for some nice treats, or to buy a car or buy a house, the pitfalls of wanting it too much with a creeping sense of entitlement or of planning for it to be only for very limited personal gain are always there – and the bigger the sums or expectations, the greater the risks and dangers. The parable invites us to be honest about our own anxieties and instincts in such matters.

The punchline of the parable comes, of course, with the intervention of the voice of God confronting the rich man, and us too, saying, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you." The ultimate

perspective here is the finality of life, and that our deeds and decisions will always one day find us out. And it will actually be sooner rather than later: “this very night.”... There is then a final question about the accumulated possessions that are now left over, as to “whose then will they be?” Is all this accumulated wealth God’s, we might ask? We say in the prayer of offering, ‘all things come from you and of your own do we give you’ suggesting that everything comes back to God. But this piece of liturgy refers to the divine economy of blessing provoking thanksgiving and self-giving, indicating that all gifted resources return to God as we put them to use for the good of others or of the whole. This extra portion, however, lies precisely outside the divine economy: it has not been put to good use. All we can say of this unwarranted surplus in the parable is that it is no longer available to the rich man: and “so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves and are not rich towards God,” their gifted assets do not and cannot deliver, either for them or for the rest of us. The final word, then, is that greed neither pays, nor does it edify, nor does it allow the divine economy to function. Another possibility is that this final question as to “whose then will they be?”, is more specific and relates to the matter of inheritance, where we started from. The story makes no mention of the brother having any dependents. In a story about inheritance this makes it likely that there are none – otherwise we would know about it. If then our brother in the story has no children, to whom will his wealth pass?... but to none other than his brother i.e. to the same person who was supposed to be sharing the original inheritance with him and isn’t! If the plaintiff brother is like the rich man in the parable, his greed will come round to bite him by his brother, and not he, becoming the final inheritor of his wealth! His greed will fall on his own head! I like this ending. It serves very neatly and sharply to let it be known that greed and acquisitiveness are good for no one, least of all the greedy and acquisitive!

1977 Words

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