

The Rich Fool (Harvest)

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[0 : 0 0] So this parable is often preached at harvest time, and it tells us the story of a rich man who had an abundant harvest that he planned to demolish his barns and build bigger ones to accommodate all his harvests. And then he gloated over his wealth, intending to enjoy himself for the rest of his life. But God took his life that very night. The parable is very useful to us here in the Western world, because it addresses the prevailing trend of our society. Even with all the hardship that COVID has brought us, it seems that we're still a society that is focused on materialism and getting more stuff. Through advertising, the media and social media, the young and old are all encouraged to aspire to own branded items and to want bigger and better cars, houses, holidays, the list could go on. But we're encouraged to have the best of everything. And it can be so easy for us also as Christians to be drawn into this trend.

And so today, as we thank God for our harvest, I think it's good for us to be reminded as Christians what our values and attitudes are towards not only material wealth, but life in general, even though this can be a bit uncomfortable. In our reading from Luke, we find Jesus surrounded by masses of people. And he's teaching and preaching to the crowds when some bloke comes up to him and asks him about family inheritance. I wonder if any of you have one of those friends who always bangs on about the same issue. You know the type, no matter what you're talking about, whether it's the latest brilliant cancer treatments or it's Strictly Come Dancing, they always want to bring the conversation back to their current crisis, whatever it might be.

Well, I imagine the chap who prompts Jesus' latest parable is one of those people. For he interrupts Jesus when he's talking about religious hypocrisy, the nature of God, redemption, by basically coming and trying to make trouble for his brother by telling tales on him. Teacher, he says, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me. Jesus doesn't answer that direct question, but he then just goes on to storytelling mode. The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest, he says. And there begins the story of a wealthy landowner who had a bumper harvest, built bigger barns, and seemed to buy, and have bought into the view that consists of planning to eat, drink, and be merry.

But God had other ideas. It's a really short parable, just six sentences, and it seems on the surface to have a fairly mundane message. You can't take it with you, it seems to be saying. It's a perfectly good message to give. Only Jesus' parables weren't perfectly good. In our midweek communion services, we've been studying the parables over the past few months, and we found them often to be shocking, challenging, and sometimes offensive stories. The parables include tales of generous kings, lavish feasts, twists where the Samaritan was a good guy, the mustard seed that grew exponentially, and the father who ran to greet his prodigal son. Yet here, with our 21st century glasses on, the story of the rich fall might sound a bit unimaginative, really. Rich man gets his comeuppance, hardly world changing. But all of this leads me to think that maybe we're not hearing the story correctly. That perhaps the story is more shocking than we think, and perhaps the message is more than you can't take it with you. So we'll have a closer look. Jesus begins, the land of a rich man produced abundant harvest. So far, so good. We learn that a rich man owns land which yields a good harvest.

In Jesus' time, a good harvest was generally understood to be a blessing from God, a sign that you pleased God. So perhaps this chap deserved such a blessing. Perhaps he was a hard-working, honest, and religiously observant person. Jesus continues, the man thought to himself, what should I do? For I have no place to store my crops.

[4 : 30] And then he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And there I will store all my grain and goods. Well, he seems to be hard-working, honest, and now seemingly wise.

He couldn't store all the crops he had, and he didn't want his crops to rot. So he planned to build bigger barns to store them to use at a later date. It seems quite sensible. Storing food because we don't know what's around the corner. And it's slightly reminiscent of Joseph, of the multicolored coat type from Egypt, who enjoyed a bumper harvest a few centuries previous. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, leading them to store up the excess crops and to save thousands from future famine and death.

So what's not to like about this rich man? And I will say to myself, says the rich man, you have plenty of grain and goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

Throughout the Bible, we see examples of numerous passages that see good harvests as a divine blessing and an excuse for a party. So on the face of it, he seems to have earned God's favor.

A man who's hardworking and honest and quite business-wise. And he also echoes actions of other well-respected people in the Bible. However, what does God say to him? God greets him by saying, you fool! It's never really the first thing you want to hear when you encounter God.

[6 : 03] So maybe this is quite shocking after all. Is it possible that to the listeners of Jesus' day, the rich man who would have been looked upon as a favored child of God was then called an idiot and his life comes to an end? He was no dodgy tax collector who received his just desserts, but he seemed to be blessed one minute and rebuked the next. In our current climate, where suspicion of rich bankers, politicians, and CEO of massive multinational companies, who shall remain nameless, and satisfaction when the privileged lose face runs rife, it would be easy to lose the shock of this parable. To reduce it to, rich man loses all.

But I don't think wealth is actually at the heart of this parable. I don't think this story should be used to just simply denounce the uber-rich. I think for, actually, it's a challenge for us all.

Whatever our payslip or our bank balance. For I believe it speaks about something that I like to bang on about quite a lot. An attitude of gratitude.

We noted earlier on how the parable is just six sentences long. But during that parable, he uses the words I or my more than nine times. The man is completely self-centred.

He may be wise and honest. He may be also respectable. But his attitude is still one of his own interests. He's not thinking about anybody else's needs.

[7 : 41] And this bears fruit in two significant ways. Firstly, the rich man speaks only to himself and not with God. He's doing well financially, thank you very much.

His land then produces a bumper crop. And yet no praise, no word of thanks to God is offered. He thinks of the consequences of such a harvest, but not of its causes.

He thinks nothing of the generous God whose awesome creation yielded such a harvest. But only of how such a harvest will benefit him. He's only interested in kicking back and eating and drinking and being merry.

Instead of respecting God and following God's ways. And if we're honest, how many of us can fall into that same trap? How many here may have been quietly satisfied with our bank balances?

Or even looked to buy a bigger house? Or even just simply enjoyed a lovely meal with friends? Without being thankful for all that we have? As the hymn says, all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above.

[8 : 47] So thank the Lord, I thank the Lord for all his love. In the midst of our really busy, hectic lives, harvest offers all of us an opportunity to say thanks. Thanks for the colours of creation and the wonders of the world.

Thanks for the gifts of education, employment and opportunity. And thanks for a bountiful harvest, a good meal and an abundance of blessing. Without pausing to give thanks, we might delude ourselves.

But we've all earned our blessings. We're self-reliant and independent. When the truth is, we are vulnerable and dependent on God's creation, blessing and amazing grace. And secondly, in this story, the rich man makes no mention or bears no consideration of his fellow sisters and brothers either.

He's only concerned for himself, not for his neighbours, for those who have no land to produce their own crops, or for the foreigner, the widow or the orphan, or the most vulnerable in society.

It's all about him. And this all-about-me attitude seems fairly prevalent today. We have sadly seen it last year with toilet roll gates, and now the massive queues for the petrol pumps and people filling up jerry cans, and garages having to close for what seemed to be a crisis fueled by the media.

[10 : 12] That if everyone acted sensibly, could be avoided. It's also that all-about-me attitude that provokes us to worry about what helping Syrian and Afghan refugees might do to our council taxes whilst women and men and children drown in the ocean.

And it's the all-about-me attitude that makes us often think that we want to have the very best for our family, but actually we're not that keen on paying our taxes or giving to charity or paying our tithes to church.

And it's that all-about-me attitude that encourages us to build bigger barns and fences and bigger barriers to others, for it's often easier and safer to be self-reliant and contained.

Now don't get me wrong, I can be just as guilty of all of this stuff as anyone else, and it's something for us all to think about seriously, because it's this all-about-me attitude that the Son of God begged us to let go of when he told parables to surprise us, when he reminded us to love friends and neighbours, strangers and even enemies, and when he walked the path of love to a cross and a hill and a garden of resurrection.

The parable of the rich man is not, then, really about money after all. It's a call for us all to check out our attitude and our sense of gratitude. And it's a reminder that even the wealthy, the wise and the religiously observant can fall forth to be a me-shaped and all-about-me outlook.

[11 : 50] And it's a challenge to love God with all our heart and mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. So let's pray together.

Dear Lord, thank you for this harvest time and help us to count our many blessings. Help us to try and let go of our me-shaped attitude and instead look to God and to you to love and serve the last and the least.

And may we give thanks to the glorious God of the harvest. You are a creator, you are a redeemer, and you are a sustainer. Amen. Amen.