

Hinde Street Methodist Church

4 August 2019 11.00am

Rev Peter Cornick

Are you rich toward God?

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Luke 12:13-21

‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’

It can’t be a coincidence, can it? The gospel reading of the week, speaks of a man building bigger barns to store his wealth. Prudently securing his assets against a turbulent time ahead in the markets. Meanwhile, aware of the supply problems in a ‘no-deal’ Brexit, the government spend a further £2 billion in ‘no-deal’ planning; including stockpiling of essential medicines and goods. It might actually be prudent given the prospect ahead – but there’s a whiff of bigger barns? It must be a coincidence – so I won’t pursue it further ...

Except to say, the letter written from church leaders, including our Methodist President and Vice President, to the new Prime Minister, and signed online by many of us, indicates the impact ‘no-deal’ could have on the poorest communities. Here are two comments from the letter which you can read and sign on the Methodist Church website:

- Advice and data from multiple reputable sources, including the UK Government, indicate that failing to agree a deal will hit those held back by poverty very hard indeed.
- At a time when increasing numbers of families have difficulties putting enough food on the table, we believe it is irresponsible to consider a course of action that is expected to make that situation worse.¹

They observe that to be ideologically self-absorbed by ‘no-deal’ is to ignore those already affected by poverty. That is a spiritual point, rather than a political one.

Still, it must be a coincidence ...

However, consider carefully the passage before us.

¹ <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/brexit-letter-july-19/>

First, someone asks Jesus to arbitrate in a family dispute over inheritance. It seems as if someone isn't getting their fair share. Jesus, wisely, refuses to get involved. Instead, he offers the feuding family some spiritual advice.

'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'

Then, Jesus tells a parable.

The problem with the parable, for us, as for those listening, is that on the face of it, it seems quite sensible. Here is a man who, having a surplus of crops, needs somewhere to store them. It appears that this man is doing what many of us do. Work hard, make a surplus, invest the profit. We create pension funds so that we too can eat, drink and relax. You recall, Jesus ate, drank and relaxed at a wedding; with his closest friends. In church, we invest so that we can both fix the roof and pay for our ministry. This isn't greed is it? Providing for our retirement? Funding the work of God?

The clue to the parable lies, not in the careful saving and investments. The clue lies, as many commentators point out, in the man's self-absorption. Count the number of times the man says, 'I' before an action. *I* will pull down my barns; *I* will store; *I* will say to *my* soul. Here is one who has failed to guard against greed and has built up possessions for himself. Here is a man obsessed by vanity – a delight in one's own achievements. Yet, according to the writer of Ecclesiastes, what will it profit him:

²² What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³ For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Self-absorption – vanity – has replaced God.

There is in this parable, no sense of community; no hint that 'we' might do something together; no notion that the great wealth might profit the vulnerable.

The message to the person who asks Jesus to arbitrate over a family inheritance is clear. There is no point in settling your dispute – even if it results in each brother receiving a fair share; equity. The question is, what are you going to do with the money? Self-absorption and greed – even divided fairly – are not the province of God.

The one from the crowd who puts the question to Jesus, might be concerned about justice: fairness; equality; a just share – something we all favour. But for Jesus, his concern is for something deeper. His concern is for righteousness.

And righteousness, throughout the Hebrew scriptures, is not simply justice or fairness. Righteousness reflects the loving purposes of God; it upholds those cast aside; it restores God's favour upon the oppressed. Psalm 112: 9 is one example:

They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor, their righteousness endures forever;

The word righteousness is not used here in the parable, but the theological concept is very clear. Justice on its own – dividing the inheritance equally – is not enough.

So, be on your guard against greed says Jesus. The consequence of not doing so, according to the parable, is death. You might want to interpret that as being dead to God. And the man is oblivious to the consequence. He becomes a rich fool.

“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

The parable ends, with, what might be seen as a challenge to us all.

²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

So, are you rich? In what ways?

Jean Vanier, who died in May, founded a worldwide movement called L'Arche. As a younger man, he could have risen through the officer ranks of the Royal Navy. But he decided he wanted to work for peace and not war. He was beginning to discern where his treasure lay.

Appalled by the way people with learning disabilities were kept in large institutions in France, Vanier set up home with two men he had met in one such place. (I'm not sure if professional practice would allow that today – but they were different times I guess). His aim was not to care for them, but for each to care for the other. To live in community, each with different needs. Whilst he undoubtedly began, aiming to improve the lives of these men, he wrote later that he was transformed by them; they were 'teachers of tenderness'. L'Arche grew from this holy risk Vanier took, into small homes around the world where people live in community, caring for one another, whatever their ability or disability. In this awareness of the needs of each other, Vanier believed one found God.

Vanier, disliked the attention of the media or church officialdom for his work. He wrote:

“I feel that people are saying, ‘You’re doing a beautiful work’; and that doesn’t interest me, because what they are really saying is, ‘I’m glad you’re doing it, not me.’”

Perhaps that suggests, many of us, admire those who share their own treasure, but want to store up our own. Where was his treasure? In what ways was he rich with God? What strikes me, reading the obituary of Vanier, is his wish to share his riches, his life, recognising people with many needs, by building community. In so doing, Vanier found the richness of life with God. The very reverse of the man in the parable who found only death.²

In what ways do you share your riches; build community? How generous am I? Or do I feel I need to keep more and more for that rainy day? Do I need that ‘wear once’ item of clothing which is then discarded to waste? How are you rich with God? It is a question to challenge each of our motives.

The parable Jesus tells, is essentially, about covetousness. Acquiring things; desiring what others have. Greed without regard for the needs of others. As Jesus says, ‘life does not consist in the abundance of possessions,’ which echoes the tenth commandment:

“You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.” (Exodus 20:17)

To those of you who look after the church’s or circuit’s or WLM’s money, prudent saving is essential so that you can fix the proverbial roof, or, more recently, mend the organ. Jesus is not criticising your prudence and investments. But you must always ask yourself a question: is our money providing the richness of God; building up community; assisting the needs of our neighbour?

‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’

The letter to the Prime Minister from the church leaders ends:

We ask that your Government urgently publishes its current evidence on the impact of a no-deal Brexit on disadvantaged communities. We would also be pleased to welcome you to one of our many projects to hear from those who a no-deal Brexit may most impact.

Boris drinking tea at the Wednesday Club? Now there’s a thought!

² <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/texts-speeches-homilies/4/1248/obituary-jean-vanier-1928-2019->

