

HE WAS RICH

Faith and the insatiable desire for more

Luke 12.13-21

Introduction

What would you like as your epitaph?

She was happy?

He was a great father or lover?

A great mate.

She was...? He was...? Capture the essence of your life in a word.

What about, 'He was rich?' What if that was all that could be said? Would you feel that was a satisfactory conclusion to 80 years of life? That is all that could be said about the man in parable that we hear from Jesus today.

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and mentoring his disciples about life in the kingdom. In the Luke story he has just been encouraging them to a fearless confession of faith before all comers even if it leads to death. This is the call to high dedication in discipleship. He

has urged them to discern how to be neighbours, how to sit at his feet and learn and how to pray to hallow God's name. It is all high octane stuff.

Then somebody yells out from the crowd. And that brings everything right down to earth.

Setting the scene-divide the inheritance (13-15)

Would you buy into a family dispute about money, inheritance or land? I know I wouldn't. Neither did Jesus. He refused to be like Solomon or Moses-No way, friend. He did not have the authority to do so anyhow. He was not that kind of rabbi.

And again this man is not asking Jesus to mediate. He is ordering Jesus to implement his plan against his older brother. No wonder Jesus is more than a little gruff. The man has decided what his rights are without the qualification of self-criticism. So Jesus will offer some.

At one level it might be seen as a cry for justice over that most sensitive of all issues, land. The man is saying in modern terms, "Give me my rights at any cost." "I want my share, I want the division now, it is my right." We may be grieving our father's death but that is irrelevant.

It is also plain that the relationship between the man and his brother is broken. The man wishes to seal that brokenness. Jesus refuses. He is not a divider.

But he does spot a problem in this man's cry for justice without self-criticism.

The problem that Jesus sees (15)

Jesus seems to perceive that behind this request is something more than just a legal grievance. He puts it down to greed and the view of life that happiness and fulfilment have their source in money and goods. Jesus will not participate in satisfying the greed he senses has provoked the complaint.

One of the unnerving characteristics of Jesus was his capacity to accurately read the motives and thoughts of others, especially when they are put as all sweetness and light and reasonableness. He has a very realistic view of the muddy wellsprings of human behaviour. The dream that abundant surpluses will achieve life is a nightmare because it consumes us with insatiable, unsatisfied desire that destroy every human relationship.

In our present climate this is a good subject to talk about. According to some recent analyses Australians are willing to wear

an increasing underbelly of poverty in the community and do nothing about it. It seems we are prepared to spend much more on pets that we will allow our government to spend on aid. They indicate a huge change from our mythology of 'fair go', 'every one is equal', 'we all should have a standard of living for which there is a basic floor of decency and dignity.' Those ideals are sinking into mythology, as an older generation die. So we cling to them to make ourselves feel decent, but like Jesus, we know something is amiss.

So the scene is set. Jesus exposes the problem with a parable.

The good of abundance (16)

The man's fields brought forth abundance. So far no problem. Abundance just is. It is something that happens to us. In this case the man has put in the work and the fields have produced.

Abundance calls forth a response from us. And it is the response, of course, that really matters. The response we make to our environment is what really matters. Our responses always tell us something about ourselves and it is that response that Jesus is really interested in.

So abundance is a good. There is no criticism of abundance. The man is already rich; no criticism there, either.

So, to lead us further Jesus takes on a little mind journey.

The soliloquy-I and my (17)

He takes us into the secret thought world of the man. He wants to take us on journey that goes behind behaviour to its source in imagination and thought- to the world that is in the mind and imagination.

He speaks to himself. He has no-one else. He appears to trust no-one else. He has no friends or cronies, no family

He makes a plan with himself (18)

What the man does, his behaviour, is to build bigger barns. That seems like a wise and prudent move. After all, you don't want the grain lying around so it will spoil.

The real problem does not lay in the action. The real problem is in the imagination, in the inner world. And two words govern that inner world-I and my. The man talks to himself as I and me. And here is our entry point into the man's world.

It is a world of practical atheism. God simply does not figure. There is no indication that the man is a theoretical atheist. All the indications are that he believes in God. God just doesn't matter.

The man does not say "Now God what shall we do?" No, he says, "I will say to my soul..." There is no thanksgiving, no praise, and no sense of gift. There is simply what I have is mine and I intend that it stay mine.

Out of that original plan flows a future plan (19)

"Soul, you have ample good laid up for many years; relax eat, drink be merry."

Out of this flow some important consequences. *He is preoccupied with possessions.* He belongs to the school of thought that says, "Whoever has the most toys when he dies, wins."

Furthermore, *he finds his security in self-sufficiency.* He does not need any one else; he does not need the love of family, nor faithful friends. He does not need god's love or a community of support.

There is no sense of hospitality or generosity in this soliloquy. Indeed the inner debate in his imagination is the antithesis of

generosity. *Greed has eaten away at him* so that there can be no thought of others and what he might do for them.

His world is a daydream of spending his whole life indulging his whims and desires. *His purpose for living is to maximise his own pleasure*, which he sees as the greatest good in life. He bought into the discredited idea that lots of money and happiness are the same thing. He also thought that his happiness, so obtained, far outweighed other matters such as justice or generosity.

This little description of his world, which Jesus draws so deftly when he examines his thoughts, puts us all on notice. Why? Because two worlds are about to collide.

The real world of the kingdom (20-21)/ the fantasy of I-my

I used to read this story my kids in the form of a storybook and they loved it. Why? Because he got it in the end. The kingdom and this man's world were always set for collision. He is the fool

The stock figure of the fool is not an ignoramus or mentally challenged person. Fools are the self-referenced and self-centred persons who think that they can run their own life and world, failing to take into account God, God's will, and God's word. Fools may be knowledgeable about stock markets but they do not

discern the spiritual and moral aspects of life and reality. Life is a gift from God. No amount of possessions can make it greater or secure it against death.

In Jesus' world life, like abundance, is not ours to do with as we please. Already in this gospel Jesus has warned his disciples, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his soul?" (9.25)

Abundance is for the sake of the kingdom. Abundance is so that all can share. Abundance is God's provision so that all of God's children, each dearly loved and made in God's image, can be set free.

You see this is not an anti-wealth pro-poverty tract. It is not a tract about how to be happy while being poor. It is a story about relational justice. It is a story that highlights that when the fields bring forth abundantly then that is the blessing of God and we had better act prudently and with great fidelity in making provision for the whole community. Being rich toward God is about being relationally just to others.

Conclusion

The clash of two worlds that Jesus unveils in his parable is still with us, perhaps even more painfully so in a country in which increasingly we are allowing ourselves to become stratified by the dollar.

The important point is that we are the intersection point for the two worlds. Would we be happy for our inner dialogues to be so brutally exposed in the light of the kingdom? This struggle for kingdom values takes place in us. Where do we position ourselves? Remember it is the God of generosity and hospitality who hears the soliloquy of our own hearts, not me. The standard of judgement is the generosity and hospitality of God.

Meditate on your own personal soliloquy on wealth.