

The parable of the rich man - Luke 12: 16-21 – Sarah Penfold

There was a rich man who had done well in business and as his profits grew so did the size of his property portfolio. He acquired a big house and a luxury yacht. Everything was set for his retirement sailing and partying with all the 'right' people. It was a shame, he thought, about the homeless people who often slept in the doorway of his offices, and the queue of families waiting for supplies from the foodbank, and those asylum seekers whose trek across Europe dominated the evening news. But had they worked hard like him, been hardnosed and ruthless at times, then their outlook would be very different.

Not for one moment did he consider that his 'success' could be due to anything other than his own efforts, or that with a tiny fraction of his wealth he could make a difference to the lives of many others. It was to quote my favourite phrase – all about him. But then just as he was about to set out on his first trip he died in the night. And having no heirs his fortune became government property.

Well that's not quite the story that we read in Luke chapter 12 but it has many of the same elements. A man becomes rich through good fortune. He has more wealth than one person can really use so he has to find some way of storing it, then a bigger barn, now either property or a hedge fund. But he gives no thought wider than his own self.

It never occurs to him that his good fortune could be due to anything other than his own efforts, Not due to the efforts of others or to the generosity of God. There are no 'thank you's. Nor does he even consider that he might share with others some of his new found wealth. It really is all about him.

There is a kind of irony that even as I am writing about people whose unhealthy interest in worldly matters prevents them from acknowledging the importance of Godly matters my emails are pinging with messages about gifts for Birmingham people in need. We know that this is a hard time for many people and are grateful for the gifts already promised for the clients of ADAVU and the Narthex.

I have struggled in writing this. The original story seems to divide worldly matters from Godly matters with a significant split as though there can be no overlap, no common interest. That does not sit easy with my reading of the New Testament as being about sharing what we have rather than not having it in the first place. But then the parable stories were told to make specific points.

But my real difficulty is that I have become intrigued by the rich man having no heirs – neither family nor trusted friends or servants. We know there were servants because without their help he could not have become rich, and he would not have stooped to do menial tasks himself. He must have had people with whom he was expecting to ‘eat, drink and be merry’. But there is nobody that he is close to.

There are many people who for all sorts of reasons have no accessible family members. People who have no friends who live close by. I was speaking to someone the other day who described me as the only person who rings her, although she rings others, It made me realise how grateful I am to the member of our parish who rings me regularly because she is conscious that otherwise it is usually me who makes the calls. This man had no one who cared about him enough to do the first century equivalent of picking up the phone.

We often assume that people who are reclusive do so by choice, and may indeed do so. But for others their distance from people can be due to bad experiences, family disagreements, or simply a drifting apart that has become a habit hard to break. Our rich man, partying on his yacht, may not even have appeared to be lonely, but it seems that he was. He only knew the worldly ways. Maybe assuming that as long as he had money others would want to be with him. We saw this in the story of the prodigal son, probably true here as well. It is easy to see how his outlook became all about him.

Perhaps instead of condemning the rich man we should look at what we can do to prevent that insidious loneliness. As we go into another lockdown there will be many people who again find themselves alone and lonely. I do have a positive lockdown story. A woman has a friend who is somewhat reclusive and although they have kept in touch, she has always been the one to initiate phone calls or meeting up. At the start of lockdown she made a conscious effort to call the friend once a week. After a few weeks she was rewarded by the friend calling her. After about six months the friend suggested that they should continue the weekly calls even when the pandemic is over. Perhaps not so reclusive after all.

The original parable exhorts us to pay more attention to heavenly things. For us in our current circumstances those heavenly things may include our interaction with others. Yes, we are probably anxious about our own families, our neighbours and our friends. But we still have the capacity to extend an ear, even though handshakes are currently banned, to those who are more isolated from the world and to ease their loneliness. Maybe they don't want it to be all about themselves.