

What Counts? (Luke 12: 13-21)

08/01/2010

We have sibling rivalry in today's passage (Luke 12:13-21). A person complains to Jesus that it is not fair that the brother refuses to share the family inheritance. **"Tell him to do so". "No,"** says Jesus, **"I will not"**.

Two weeks ago in the gospel passage, Martha was complaining to Jesus about her sister Mary. **"It is not fair, she isn't helping me in the kitchen; tell her to help me". "No, says Jesus, I will not"**. Now on the surface both of these two requests seem reasonable and legitimate. Yet in both cases Jesus says No. Why? Because he is much more concerned with deeper issues; our inner attitudes, priorities and motives, than superficial ones. If these deeper issues are not 'simpatico' with God's kingdom, then spiritual development is retarded.

Having said no, he adds a warning (v15). **'Look out or greed will trap you, remember, you cannot measure the worth of a person by their material possessions.'** But so often that is precisely what our society does. **"He is very successful"**, we say in deferential tones. **"She has done very well,"** we intone. This is usually **code language**, meaning that they have made lots of money and acquired lots of things and as a consequence have a high status in society.

Greed is not limited to wealthy people or even Ebenezer Scrooge types. No greed is an equal opportunity employer. It does not matter whether we have very little or very much or something in between. Greed has a message for us all. Anyone can find themselves to be in the grip of greed. You know what I mean- a sense of dissatisfaction with our lot in life (of course we always compare ourselves to those who have more than us)- or that voice within whispering **'you need this-this will make you happy/feel better/feel important'**. Our society is not merely a consumer society, but a materialistic one, one which assumes that all that truly matters in this life are those things which can be measured. seen, tasted, smelt or touched;

Conversely our society tends not to highly value **intangibles**;

The quality of our relationships with others; the maturity and growth of a person's character: the level of security and love for children in our homes:

Our Spiritual lives, the value of nurturing of the soul by attention to its development and growth:

The quality of service- care for and love of others:

Materialism and greed are like seeds scattered in our hearts and they produce a harvest. According to Jesus: The harvest that it yields is one of constant anxiety (v22ff.) fear (v32) and lack of freedom (v35)

So we need to take seriously Jesus warning about greed. To recognize the voice of greed when it speaks to us, usually in honeyed tones. **'You need, you deserve.....'**. We must not to give greed an inch, because if we do then tomorrow it will want a foot and the next day a yard! But, to **simply** react to greed negatively will lead us to a joyless life, complete with lots of guilt and a propensity to judge others (**"How can he justify owning that sort of car? How can she spend that much on a dress?"**).

Therefore we need to develop an alternative lifestyle, one characterized by generosity, hospitality and service. Every time that we give, and especially when we give joyfully and sacrificially we are saying **'No'** to the powers of greed and materialism. But also we who are followers of Jesus Christ need to give to the church; not primarily to improve the financial health or meet the needs of the church, but for our own spiritual health and well-being.

The parable that Jesus tells (v16-20), which we know as **'The Rich Fool'**, could accurately be called the **'Parable of the American Dream'**. It involves someone going from rags to riches, through hard work and planning. **But** the judgment of God on this particular entrepreneur is **"You fool- you've wasted your life and opportunities"**. Now do not misunderstand, this is **not** a socialist parable! God does not judge escaping from poverty through hard work as bad or foolish, rather it is the double failure of this individual which is the issue.

First he lived ignoring his mortality. We may not want to think this way, but we are mortal, we will die and therefore we need to live and act now in a manner which takes into account our mortality. Katherine Norris her book **"Dakota"** quotes a saying from the Old Ones **"One who keeps death before his eyes conquers despair"**. The man in the parable, who has become known as the rich fool, made choices and decisions **as if** he would live forever-or at least for a very long time. He prepared for his own comfort but not for his ultimate destiny. Concentrating upon " I will, I will, I will (v17-19) he discovered too late that everything, even his own life was in reality a short term loan from God. Thinking that he was an owner he discovered that he himself was owned

Secondly because of this he did not live **'rich towards God'**. There is no mention in this parable of the man giving anything of his abundance to anyone in need, let alone generously to the support of the temple. In that sense he was not rich towards God. But more significantly, God occupied, at most, a very minor place in his life. I suspect that he actually thought **"I do not need God, I am doing fine"**.

Conclusion.

But what about you and me? What will our kids, our family members, friends and colleagues remember most about us, when we are no longer here ? People do not

remember William Wilberforce for his wealth, position and power, but for a life lived **'rich towards God'**.

He worked to provide legal protections for boy chimney sweeps and other young children whose labor was being exploited, for Catholic Emancipation - allowing Catholics to become MPs, hold public office and serve in the army, prison reform, he worked for restrictions on capital punishment, protections for animals. He was generous with his time and money, believing that those with wealth had a duty to give a significant portion of their income to the needy. Yearly, he gave away thousands of pounds, much of it to clergy to distribute in their parishes. He paid off the debts of others, supported education and in a year of food shortages gave to charity more than his own yearly income. Pre-eminently, he is remembered for his work for the abolition of Slavery throughout the British Empire. He was 24 when he became an M.P and a year later he had a conversion to Evangelical Christianity (1785). For the next 42 years he worked in Parliament to bring about the abolition of slavery. In 1826 when he had to resign seat due to ill health, the bill had still not passed. This did not take place until 1833 (7 long years later). Wilberforce died 3 days after the bill was passed by both houses of Parliament.

Ray and Georgie were members of my church in Cape Town. They were building a huge, wonderful Southern, Antebellum-style mansion, -but in the Dutch, South African style, outside Cape Town. This was their dream. All their energy, money and focus went on completing this. They drove old cars, wore simple, cheap clothes, never ate out and refused even to pledge to the Church in order to finance their dream house. Just before it was finished, when they were planning to relax, enjoy it, and be more generous to others, Ray was diagnosed with acute leukemia and died about three months later. Their story reminded me eerily of this parable of Jesus. I could not throw off the sense of God sadly saying to Ray **"you fool, you have wasted your opportunities"**.

But what of us?

Are we living our lives in the light of our own mortality?

Are we making choices that reveal we are rich towards God? Amen