

## Sermon 4 August 2019 The rich fool

### Luke 12:13-21

Our Gospel passage begins with a request being made of Jesus to settle a dispute between two brothers with regards their father's estate. It was not uncommon for people in Palestine to take their disputes to respected rabbis but Jesus refuses to get involved. However, he does take the opportunity to make a point about what our attitude to material things should be. To put it quite simply, the accumulation of wealth will not make us happy, but rather a relationship with God will. And in this context, that relationship with God will ensure our place with him in the afterlife, and the way to that relationship is what we do for others – again in this context, being generous. In other words, sharing our wealth with others. It is a theme Jesus spells out on more than one occasion. A little further on in Luke's gospel, Jesus is asked by a rich man what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus tells him that he must sell all he has and give the money to the poor. The man is naturally somewhat downcast at the thought of doing this. Jesus then says, *'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.'* Luke 18:25.

I want to make two points here. Firstly, God's Kingdom is, on the one hand, the afterlife. So by being generous we are, in a sense booking a place with God in the afterlife. But God's Kingdom can also refer to this life. It can refer to a situation, a state of affairs where we are looking after one another; where everyone is putting into practice Jesus's commandment, 'to love one another.'

This leads me on to the second point – when we put this into practice; when we give, we feel good about ourselves, we feel happy. That is part and parcel of being part of God's Kingdom. About ten years ago a study by a Harvard Business School professor found that giving money to someone else lifted happiness more than spending it on themselves.

A similar study at about the same time carried out by the Berkeley National Institute of Health found that when people give to charity, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection and trust, creating a 'warm glow' effect.

In the end, what makes us happy? There are various things that can contribute – job satisfaction, playing a particular sport, gardening, performing on stage etc. But ultimately, it will be people. Of that, I have no doubt. The good Lord has made us to live in community and in partnership with one another. He has made us to be dependent on one another, not necessarily in a physical way, though that does come into it, but more in an emotional way. We feed off each other, we need each other.

God has made us in such a way that we are sustained, nourished, healed, nurtured and encouraged through interaction with one another. If you want to bring it all together in one word, I couldn't think of a better word than *love*. We have a responsibility to ourselves and to one another to reach out in affection, in regard, in love. Jesus understood so very well that this is how we nourish and sustain, not just one another, but equally important, ourselves.

A well-known psychiatrist tells the story of how a beautiful and well-dressed woman came to see him. She complained that she felt her whole life to be empty; it had no meaning.

The psychiatrist went to the door and called in the elderly lady who cleaned the office floors. He said to the wealthy woman, 'I'm going to ask Mary here to tell you how she found happiness. Please listen.'

The elderly lady put down her broom and told her story. 'Well, my husband died of malaria and three months later my only son was killed by a car. I had nobody, I had nothing left. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. I never smiled at anyone, I even contemplated suicide. Then one evening a little kitten followed me home. Somehow I felt sorry for that kitten. It was cold outside so I let the kitten in. I got it some milk, and it licked the plate clean. Then it purred and rubbed itself against my leg. For the first time in many months, I found myself smiling. Then I stopped to think: if helping a little kitten could make me smile, maybe doing something for people could make me happy. So the next day I baked some biscuits and took them to a neighbour who was sick in bed. Every day I tried to do something nice for someone. It made me so happy to see them happy. Today, I don't know of anybody who sleeps and eats better than I do. I've found happiness by giving it to others.'

The point is this, it works both ways. Not only do we find our fulfilment and our value in being cared for, but just as importantly, we find it in caring for others. It is perhaps a little ironic that it is in giving something away that we find our value. Let me tell you a fable.

*A wise woman who was travelling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met a traveller who was hungry, and the woman opened her bag to share some food with him. The hungry traveller saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to her. She did so without hesitation.*

*The traveller left rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth a lot. But a few days later he came back to return the stone to the woman. 'I've been thinking', he said. 'I know how valuable this stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something*

*even more precious. Please give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me this stone.'*

I finish with an observation I have shared with you before – I have never seen an unhappy generous person, and I have also never seen a happy mean person. In a similar vein, I have never seen an unhappy person who has a true relationship with God, and I do emphasise the word *true*, but I have seen many unhappy people who don't have a true relationship with God.

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