**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

The home groups in their meetings over recent months have been reading The Upside Down Bible, subtitled What Jesus had to say about money, sex and violence.

This parable of the rich fool is one of the many money-themed passages found in Luke’s Gospel. A request from the crowd for Jesus to settle a disputed inheritance shifts the focus of his teaching: just prior to this story, Jesus has been talking about faithfulness under persecution. Now he is talking about faithfulness with a money angle. What does it mean to be faithful and how do we express our faithfulness?

 The Scottish businessman, entrepreneur and philanthropist Sir Tom Hunter started out selling trainers from the back of a van. That fledgling business became Europe’s largest independent retailer, Sports Division, and at the age of just 37, he sold it for £260 million and moved on.

Not to some tax haven, to eat drink and be merry though. He continues to make money, but **making money is,** to quote him, **only half of the equation**. He also lives by the tenet: **a man who dies rich, dies disgraced.** And to that end, he has donated huge sums to Band Aid, Comic Relief, Make Poverty History and any number of other forces for good, both here and abroad. His ultimate aim is to give £1 billion to charity. He did some study of philanthropy and philanthropic thinking in order to make sure he gave well and appropriately, and the key thing the philosopher said to him was: **Remember, none of this is yours**.

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***Remember, none of this is yours.***

And that is the challenge that lies at the heart of the gospel story today. We can probably assume that as a good Jew the farmer gave to the poor and tithed his harvest. He certainly wouldn’t be alone in wanting a comfortable retirement and a decent pension. Yet the story is always referred to as the story of the rich fool. What makes him a fool?

He is a fool to believe that it is all about him, I suppose. He believes that he is accountable to no one, the sole owner and sole beneficiary of all that he has. One of the problems of increasing affluence is that it can blind us to our responsibilities, when in fact it is our obligations to others that lie at the heart of true wealth and true worship.

Our spiritual health depends a lot on practical action. And the key to that health is the understanding that, as we say sometimes at the offertory: all things come from you – and of your own do we give you.

Jesus addresses everyone - his disciples and those who are in the crowds - in this passage. It was not unusual for people to ask him to arbitrate in tricky situations – religious leaders were consulted on matters of ethics and right decision-making.

 Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me, was the original request. The man asking obviously had a bit of a dispute going on with his brother. Land was status and wealth. According to custom, the eldest son got a double share, but all sons got something when a father died. It is possible that this was a simple plea for justice but, looking at the use of the word ‘greed’, it seems likely that this is about wanting more. Note that Jesus does not deny the importance of good financial arrangements; what he does is tackle deeper issues than that. That phrase again: the gravitational pull of wealth.

So Jesus says: Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. And then he tells them a story, a parable, which illustrates his point: here is this man with so much that he hasn’t got storage facilities big enough and decides to demolish the ones he’s got in order to build even bigger ones. Then he plans to retire, sit back and enjoy. God’s point is that– this very night your life is being demanded of you. The man will die that evening. Then what good is all that ‘stuff’ that he has amassed?

Jesus doesn’t want any part in taking sides in this dispute. But he does have an important general precept about guarding against greed; against hoarding for its own sake. Do we really want our parents to store whatever they have built up over the years, in order that we might get it in the will? Or would we rather they enjoyed it: travelled, donated to favourite causes, had experiences they couldn’t have while they had dependent children? Frankly, I’d rather my father, who was 90 on Friday, went on exotic holidays and drank rum punch or … champagne!

This issue doesn’t seem to be about lawful sharing but about the seductive pull of always wanting more, just for more’s sake. Reasonable hope of inheritance has grown like bread with yeast into a sense of entitlement and then, beyond even that, to a demand. One senses that even if Jesus had been inclined to support his request, he would still have wanted more. *Such is the gravitational pull of money.*

The paradox of course, and why money can be such a difficult discipleship issue, is that we cannot live life without possessions. God gave us material, physical bodies, and those bodies need a certain amount of stuff in order to stay alive and to flourish. So the issue is not one of having or not having possessions but of attitude to them. We have to be mindful of how easily we can become hostage to the aspirations of the society we live in.

Jesus is not criticising wealth creation – but like all things, wealth and possessions are a gift – by one means or another, all things come from you...

What the parable focuses on is the seductiveness of accumulation. Note that the farmer isn’t just wanting to build bigger barns for his huge harvest of grain, but to keep his other goods in too.

At the heart of the story is the question: What shall I do? That is the question to be asked in so many situations: How should we live as Christians? The problem in the parable is that the rich farmer answers that question with no reference to anything or anyone outside of himself.

And missing from the story is not only any reference to God but also any concern for the wider community. His hard work and wealth are not to be dismissed or diminished, but he is failing to recognise the gifts he has been blessed with. Generosity is not just giving to the poor; it is justice and righteousness in all his dealings.

There is this ironic contrast between the abundance he has stored in his barns and the little time that he has left. He hasn’t understood that his life is God’s – for the giving and the taking away. And his goods are his for the having – but not for holding too tightly.

We are caretakers and stewards but never owners. Ultimately our mortality shatters any illusion of ownership. I said last week that what we are led to believe by the world around us is that enough is usually just that little bit more than we have. Can we instead practise contentment and gratitude?

Red Nose Day is coming up, when people are moved to enormous generosity by scenes and stories of tragedy and hardship. Such generosity is absolutely part of what it means to follow Jesus, but there is something about this slightly knee-jerk response to need that satisfies us in the short term but doesn’t change who we are.

Giving – to whatever causes we are drawn to – in a regular planned way enables the causes to plan their response. It blesses others because it offers them security in an uncertain world.

And it blesses us because it speaks of faithfulness to a cause – not just in times of crisis but at all times.

And it speaks of faithfulness to God in acknowledging that our lives and goods are His – for the giving, for the using and for the taking. **Amen**