

31 July 2016 St Peter's

'Filling our emptiness' *Luke 12: 13-21*

Garrison Keillor, creator of the US radio show, *'A Prairie Home Companion'* tells this story: "A rich man wanted desperately to take his wealth with him to heaven. He talked to many people to discover a way and finally found a psychic who had the answer. She gave him a battered old suitcase and said "Liquidate everything you have and buy gold. Put it in this suitcase and when you die it will go with you." The man did this. Later he died and was excited to see when he reached the other side that the suitcase was there. He looked inside and there was all his gold! He picked it up and struggled to lug it up to the pearly gates. There, St Peter looked at him quizzically and said, "You're the first person I've ever seen bring anything with them! May I look in the bag?" The man proudly handed it over. St Peter looked at all the gold in the bag and still looked puzzled. The man asked him what was wrong and St Peter replied, "I just don't understand why you would bring paving stones with you!" (*quoted by Paul Bryant-Smith*)

Today's Gospel is often used to remind us of the folly of greed, and, in our materialist society, we need all the reminders we can get, but this morning I'd like to talk about what's behind that greed. What is it that drives people to consume far more than they need to meet their basic requirements for food, shelter and clothing? What is it that makes us want to build more and more, bigger and bigger barns? Could it be that the real problem is not that we have too much and want even more, but that our society is suffering from a sense of emptiness?

I used to visit a man who would always refer to himself as 'poor old...' He saw himself as poor in spite of the fact that he had a very healthy bank balance. What he didn't have was a loving heart, and that drove others away, so that even those who tried to love him gave up. His true poverty was a lack of love.

At the root of many of the social problems that plague our society is addiction, particularly the addictions to alcohol and drugs which fill our prisons, cause violence and crime on our streets, and even affect our schools. But behind these addictions we may discover a terrible emptiness; a need for love, which the addict tries to blot out with the anaesthetic of alcohol or drugs, replacing it with an artificial, transient moment of pleasure. However, addiction is also endemic in our society among us law abiding, respectable citizens. How many of us, myself included, are addicted to our daily cup of coffee?

Many in our city who needed to move out for earthquake repair work struggled to deal with the accumulation of possessions over a life time. There's nothing wrong with having beautiful treasures, furniture, books and music to enrich our lives. The problem comes when these things become more important than people, more important than God.

In contrast, after the earthquakes, we also heard many stories of heroism, of people discovering their neighbours and a real sense of community. The crisis enabled many people throughout the country to recognise their own wealth and find their generosity. It was perhaps even a relief from the guilt of owning so much to be able to give something away.

When we find ourselves needing to get rid of possessions, because our circumstances change, we often find the experience exhausting. However, once we've finished sorting and getting rid of 'stuff' we may feel an enormous sense of relief, a lightness that makes us recognise that our possessions were as much a burden as a joy. After we've let go of them, even photos and other sentimental memorabilia don't seem to matter anymore. The real treasures have remained; because we always have the people in our hearts and memories; we have each other, and we best of all, we have God with us.

The rich fool in Jesus's parable was not foolish because he was rich. He was foolish because he believed that riches were all he needed. He wasn't rich in his love of God. Did you notice how isolated he was? His story is all about 'I'. 'I haven't anywhere to store my crops'; 'I will store my corn and other goods'; 'I will say to myself, Lucky man', 'now I will take life easy'. There's no mention here of any family or friends. No doubt he had many workers who helped him plant and gather his crops. No doubt he wouldn't be building that barn by himself. Yet he seems totally alone, self-absorbed, self-centred. Maybe Charles Dickens had this man in mind when he created his famous character, Scrooge.

This is what Jesus is concerned about. Remember the context of this parable? Jesus was approached by a man who was jealous that his brother had been left the family inheritance. Immediately Jesus says: 'a person's true life is not made up of the things he owns, no matter how rich he may be'. Jesus knows that it is where we place our focus that matters. If it's all on material things then we will have no room for God True happiness, as we all know, comes from putting our time, our energy, and our concern into working for God's Kingdom.

The rich man thought he could put all that on hold. He thought he'd finally reached the limit of his quest for material security. Now he could sit back and enjoy it. Now he could eat, drink and be merry - things he hadn't considered important while he was building up his assets. But that's where he made his big mistake. He left it too long. All the time he was focussed on his wealth, he hadn't noticed that 'the kingdom of God' was all around him, 'the kingdom was within him', and there he would find true happiness, true merriment.

Poor man – he missed out on the real fulfilment. He didn't understand that 'where your treasure is there will your heart be also'. New Zealand hymn writer, Shirley Murray puts it well:

'Love and trust need no hoard, richest treasure can't be stored.

Jesus said, have a care, your heart will always be where your riches are'. Amen