

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21; Colossians 3:1-11. 1.08.10

*Riches, receiving and rest*

I think we all know perfectly well that the man who we read about in Luke's Gospel this morning is a fool. When he's built his latest barn and stuffed it with grain, just like all the others, we are almost waiting for him to drop dead and it's no surprise when he does. And it's no surprise to hear God call him a fool, for this man's folly is clear to us all. He has spent his life in pursuit of things that he cannot take with him when he goes – there are no pockets in shrouds, after all – and we can just imagine all that he missed out on in his relentless, obsessive pursuit of wealth. No doubt his family suffered. No doubt he was a stranger to his kids. No doubt his wife was long-suffering – he's probably been through a few - and no doubt his health suffered too. Indeed we'd love to know what he died of. I bet it was a stress related disease. My money would be on a heart attack or maybe a stroke, or maybe some complications arising from ulcers, because these are the real dividends that wealth brings: not peace of mind and contentment but anxiety and premature death. Yes, we suspect that his riches didn't really bring him happiness or satisfaction at all (or at least we secretly hope they didn't). As the old song puts it,

How many times have you heard someone say  
 If I had his money I would do things my way?  
 But little they know that it's so hard to find,

One rich man in ten with a satisfied mind.

Now, to be fair, this man is not pictured as a tyrant or a scoundrel. There is no reason to think that he has accrued his wealth by unjust or illegal means. There is no indication that he has cheated or robbed anybody. What strikes us about him though is his drive. There is just no stopping him. Every new barn bursting with grain prompts the building of another, and another, and we cannot but admire such energy. What is tragic about him would appear to be his inability to see beyond himself. He seems totally self-absorbed. We find him talking to himself, for example, and just notice the number of times the words 'I', 'my' and 'myself' feature in what he says to himself. We read that 'he debated with himself: 'What am *I* to do? *I*

have not the space to store *my* produce. This is what *I* will do... *I* will pull down *my* barns and build them bigger. *I* will collect in them all *my* grain and other goods, and *I* will say to *myself*, “you have plenty of good things laid by...”. His speech to himself is afflicted with the personal pronoun because that is where his life is firmly centred – on himself.

Now, clearly, this morning would be a great opportunity to use this sermon to sound of about the dangers of money and the folly of a relentless pursuit of wealth. And we could talk about bankers and we could demonise them even further, hoping that there are none in the congregation, and we could point out the calamitous effects of their greed, and we could point the finger at BP and the ruinous way that the profit motive trumps health and safety every time, and we could show pictures of the dreadful environmental consequences of the oil spill. And we could work ourselves into a lather once again about our unequal, unjust world where still the bloated rich live side by side with the dirt poor, and we might leave church feeling just a bit better for it, and maybe just a little self-righteous.

I think though that we know all that stuff. I think that we have heard it all a thousand times and rather than simply condemning this man with his barns, I want to try to help him. I would like to find some way to save him from his folly. I would like to give him some kind of Christian perspective that might rescue him from his self-preoccupation and the damage he may be doing to himself and his family and his health. What we need is a different model of a rich person and someone who came to my mind when I was thinking about this story, someone whose example might be put alongside this rich fool, is the figure of Andrew Carnegie, perhaps the classic example of the great, wealthy philanthropist.

Andrew Carnegie had the good fortune to be born in Scotland, in the town of Dunfermline in 1835. He had the bad fortune however to be born into poverty, son of a weaver who lived in a cottage with one main room that was shared with an adjacent family. You could hardly imagine more humble beginnings. The family finances improved somewhat in Carnegie’s early years, only to be hit by severe economic depression, prompting the Carnegie family to borrow money to emigrate to America, where they settled in a very poor part of Pennsylvania. There, aged 13, Andrew got a

job in a mill, and the story of how he became one of the richest men in America through railways and iron and steel is a fantastic mix of hard work, determination, initiative, shrewdness, lucky connections with some very dubious people, and being in the right place at the right time - not least during the American Civil War. And with Carnegie, as with the rich fool in our story, there seems to be this insatiable drive, and we wonder where this comes from. To what can we attribute this determination to go on creating wealth and never to be satisfied? Well, it's possible that it actually came from the Christian faith. There is after all a theory that links certain kinds of Christianity with capitalism, where the creation of wealth becomes a sign that you have been blessed by God and that you are truly among the saved. Or perhaps, like many people born into poverty, Carnegie was motivated to better himself simply as a result of the horrors he had experienced in his early life. Indeed maybe that was what drove the rich fool in our story. Maybe he too had pulled himself up from humble beginnings. Unlike the fool however, Carnegie was acutely aware of the danger of idolatry and greed. Verse 5 of our Colossians reading this morning warns us 'to put to death greed which is nothing less than idolatry' and Carnegie might have had that verse in mind when he wrote that 'Man must have an idol and the amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry! No idol is more debasing than the worship of money!' And his determination not to idolise money meant that, unlike the fool, he was utterly committed to giving it away.

The clearest exposition of Carnegie's philosophy of philanthropy came in an essay he wrote called 'The Gospel of wealth' – significantly titled, for he believed that wealth could be gospel, good news. Carnegie was aware that too often rich people squandered their wealth in indulgent living – the whole philosophy of 'eat and drink and enjoy yourself' that is quoted by the rich fool – and he was determined that this should not happen. But Carnegie had also been influenced perhaps by our reading from Ecclesiastes this morning. There the writer frets over what will happen to his wealth when he dies. 'I came to hate all my labour and toil here under the sun, since I should have to leave its fruits to my successor', he says. So also with Carnegie. Even bequeathing his money to charity meant

losing control of it, and he was determined that his wealth should be used to encourage people to better themselves – as he had done – and so bequeathing money to libraries and universities was among his priorities. And unlike our rich fool Carnegie saw it as his life's work to get rid of as much wealth as he could before he died. He was an advocate of high taxation on the estates of dead millionaires and he declared that 'a man who dies rich dies disgraced.'

Andrew Carnegie stands therefore as a classic and an inspiring example of the generous benefactor, the extravagant, principled philanthropist and he stands in stark contrast to our rich fool. But I wonder if his example is enough. His 'Gospel of Wealth' attracted much praise but few disciples and I suspect that giving the rich fool a copy and telling him to give his money away would have made no impact at all, any more than it would in today's bloated, consumer society. Can you imagine one of our celebrity footballers declaring that to die rich is to die disgraced? Something deeper, something stronger is surely needed if we are to be liberated from our captivity to wealth and consumerism. In fact what we need is to go beyond talking about human duty and human responsibility and to start talking about God, because that's what Jesus does.

When this man comes to Jesus in the crowd and asks him to settle his dispute with his brother over his inheritance, Jesus refuses to be drawn in and to take sides. He's just not interested. What he does do however is talk about God, and this is where it is unhelpful that our reading from Luke today ended where it did for if we had read on we would have come to Jesus' sublime teaching about anxiety about food and clothes and possessions. Here Jesus points to the ravens in the sky who build no barns and yet are fed, and to the lilies of the field whose splendour outshines the glitziest, most glamorous wardrobes of the rich. And behind the ravens and the lilies Jesus is trying to direct people to God and the kind of God revealed in the beauty of the world and of nature. What Jesus is telling us is that the whole of life is framed by the God who is the giver, the God of grace, the generous God, the open-handed God from whom we receive. He is pointing away from petty preoccupations about money and consumption and he's directing people to the theatre of God's glory. And if that doesn't put money

into perspective, if that doesn't refocus our whole perspective on wealth and loosen our hold on it, nothing else will.

Today, as we ponder this passage, I want to suggest that you do two things. As part of our 'Earthed' programme that we are running here at Emmanuel we have asked people to contribute photographs that convey something of the wonder of the earth. They're on display on the wall and they convey far more than can possibly be said. Take time to look at those pictures. Look at them and just ponder the God displayed in them and what that means for your life.

But secondly, today we celebrate Holy Communion where Jesus takes his place among us as host. Holy Communion locates us as receivers from God's bounty. We gather here round the table with empty hands and here is displayed our most basic posture before God - as recipients. As you prepare to receive the bread and wine today take a moment to think of all that you receive and have received from God. Think of God's grace in your life.

And when we do these things we will recognise this man with his barns and his grain and his stock-piles as the fool that he most surely is, and we will know to live our lives more wisely. Amen.

