

## **7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity (Proper 13, Year C)**

**Luke 12.13-21**

**Christ Church, Chelsea**

**31 July 2022**

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Money can't buy happiness? Yeah, right.

A few years ago the Cabinet Office published a study of life satisfaction reported by people in various careers. Draw a graph which set the life satisfaction score against the average income for that profession, and you got a fairly steady line with life satisfaction increasing as wages rose. So at the bottom of the list came pub landlords – low pay, and of course long hours and often a very precarious existence. Head towards the top of the list, and second came chief executives – high pay, and presumably a sense of having made it to the top. They were, though, I should say, beaten to the top of the life satisfaction list by a profession who were a real outlier on the graph. Low-ish pay, but the highest levels of life satisfaction reported. That group was... the clergy. So you had the odd sight of the BBC filming a contemporary of mine from theological college who had been a pub landlord before being ordained, standing behind the bar at his local and reminiscing – like the stereotypical bearded, slightly portly landlord he had been – about the good old days...and about how things were so much better now.

Clergy aside, though, it was clear that often people were more satisfied with their life (for which, read 'happy') if they had more money. And that's perhaps understandable. Live near the breadline and you have the huge stress of everyday concerns about paying for food, travel, heating and so on. Become well off and you get the kind of opportunities familiar to many in this area: global travel, leisure, second homes, private education and so forth. Managing all that, and keeping up with the new set of Jones's around you, can bring its own kind of stress – but perhaps of a slightly different order from putting food on the table.

The character in our gospel certainly falls into the wealthier group of people. Here, after all, is someone with lands so extensive he already has multiple barns in which to store his crops. And after a bumper harvest he now plans to knock down these barns and build bigger. More barns, more grain, more profit. His life satisfaction is surely pretty good already.

And yet, Jesus says, there is something wrong. It's not necessarily in the man's decision to build more barns. That's an understandable business decision, after all. But there is a problem with his motives. Just hear how the man articulates his plan: What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? ... I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.' I ... I ... my ... I ... I... my ... I ... my ... my. For this businessman, all that is around him is his: his effort, his success; his righteous reward.

And, what's more, it's by these same assets that, the man believes, he can secure his future. Build the new barns. Watch the grain come in; wait till the price is high; watch the money roll in. And in the meantime: relax, eat, drink, be merry.

And yet it is at this moment of apparent victory that God speaks. 'You fool', he says. Tonight you will die. And what will you be left with?

The man has, we might say, made two giant mistakes.

The man's immediate mistake is that he has tried to secure his entire future through his wealth. This might work in this life – we can invest in low-risk assets, buy insurance policies against disaster, and save to prepare for a comfortable later life. But, as God's comments emphasise, our wealth is of little use in the next life.

But the man's mistake goes deeper than this. His crucial mistake is that he has failed to recognise where his wealth comes from, and what it is for. His 'I...I...I's and 'my...my...my's speak of his belief that all he has is his – his work, his talents, his right, his to enjoy.

And seen with the eyes of faith, this is to miss out on what true humanity looks like. The man has certainly made use of his talents to earn his money,

but the talents themselves are a gift of God. The man is not alone but a member of a community: however he chooses to spend his money, he needs to consider the needs of those around him.

Indeed, from the perspective of faith this man is something of a failure – with no sense of where his life comes from, and trapped by his money from living life alongside others. This doesn't look like the life to the full that Jesus speaks of.

Can money buy happiness? To an extent, yes. Indeed, to an extent it can buy the genuine joys of time spent with others; of time not bound by the demands of working life; the joy of freedom to explore our beautiful world. But in itself money cannot bring us closer to people. It is a dangerous good, bringing out the Gollum-esque tendencies as its shimmer catches our eye. And money is entirely a thing of this world. It is a mechanism by which we translate labour into other things, a highly effective tool of this world but of no consequence for the new heaven and the new earth.

The story that Jesus tells is traditionally called the Parable of the Rich Fool. The man is a fool in God's eyes, because he has missed the point of life. What, I wonder, would God make of the society we have created for ourselves in the last half-century? With our student loan debt and mortgages, our praise of fast fashion and consumer culture, our disregard for many of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society – maybe ours is a society marked by foolishness, scarred by the belief that it is by money that we will be saved. If that is the state of our life together, we are poor indeed. 'What will it profit [someone] to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?', as Jesus puts it elsewhere (Mark 8.36). Perhaps, like the old quip about democracy, our current system is both deeply flawed and better than any option. But either way, the rich man serves as a cautionary tale. We ask God for grace to imagine a world shaped by the cares of love, compassion and peace; for forgiveness for the ways that our financial system benefits us at the expense of millions around the world; and for the insight and courage to live out our own lives not as fools but in the wisdom of God.