



## being rich towards god

There seems to be a bit of a trend at the moment towards the concept of de-cluttering. If you go in to any book shop, or look on-line it's possible to find a whole range of self-help books that all advocate different strategies for streamlining our possessions, such as starting small, or giving away one item a day. The author of one of these self-help books, Marie Kondo, suggests that the trick is to go through every single thing in our home – every book, each pair of socks, the unwise purchases stuffed at the back of a drawer - and ask the question 'Does this spark joy?' before deciding whether the item in question should be kept or given away. Apparently one reader, when she asked herself this question, decided to get rid of her husband ... clearly, de-cluttering can be a risky business.

At the same time, there is an equally persuasive lobby that promotes the merits of buying more ... it's the seductive message of our time – that material possessions are, in some way, a measure of our success or worth as a person. And it's a relentless message – both explicit and subliminal. It's really hard to resist and it can lead to something I've heard described as 'stuffocation' – the material equivalent of the obesity epidemic. And so we can sometimes find ourselves in a situation where we end up clearing out cupboards and giving things away, in order to make room for the new things we have just bought ...

Today's Gospel reading can seem, at first reading, to be simply an example of a family dispute over inheritance, followed by a warning against the perils of hoarding our

possessions. But maybe there's a bit more to it than that ...

Jesus has a bit of a habit of using parables – there are more than 40 of them – as a way of communicating with his audience, whether it's his disciples or, in this case, a large crowd that has come to hear him teach. Rather than preaching at his audience, Jesus tells a story to illustrate the point he wants to make. In this parable, often referred to as the Rich Fool, he tells the story of a wealthy man whose land is doing well – he's making plans for the future and he's basking in his good fortune. And Jesus does not say that any of this is wrong – he doesn't criticise the man for being a rich, productive, successful farmer. Jesus conveys his message in the *way* he tells the man's story. He tells his audience that the man thought to himself 'What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?' The man goes on to tell *himself* '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.<sup>19</sup> And *I* will say to *my* soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'. Really, it's such a bleak story - here is a man with riches beyond his wildest imagination – beyond the capacity of his biggest barn – but he doesn't seem to have anyone else in his life – no friends, no family, no acquaintances. He ends up talking to himself and, although he invites his soul to 'relax, eat, drink and be merry' – there seems to be no-one else to share in his merry-making.

So what went wrong? We don't get to hear the rest of the rich man's story – we don't know whether he chose to cut himself off from his family and friends, or whether they

ostracised him. We *do* know that he was busy - building his barns, protecting his grain stores, ensuring his own material wealth and comfort. And in the parable, the man is chastised not for being rich, nor for being busy, but for failing to attend to God - Luke says 'So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God'. But what does that actually mean? How can we be rich towards God?

Today, 31 July, is the feast of Ignatius of Loyola, who died on this date in 1556, 560 years ago. As many of you probably know, Ignatius established the Society of Jesus, now known as the Jesuits, which he founded in 1540, telling his first followers to go out and "**find God in all things.**" Ignatian spirituality is rooted in the belief that God is active in our world – right here, right now – and that God can be found in every person, in every place and in everything. So God is here, today, with us in church – and God is also present – absolutely, totally present – in every aspect of each of our lives – all the highs, all the lows, and all the mundane bits in between. This Ignatian practice of finding God in all things seems to be one way of really 'being rich towards God'. It doesn't mean withdrawing from the world into a solitary life, as the rich man did in the parable – in fact, it meant quite the opposite – going out into the world to find God in all things, and in all people.

The parable of the Rich Fool suggests that real richness cannot be found on our own – that a life led in complete isolation from others is pretty meaningless. One of the other Gospel writers, Matthew, tells us that the two most important commandments are to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22: 37-40). These commandments invite us in to a relationship – with God, with others, and with ourselves. And the parable of the Rich Fool, too, shows how limited our lives are if we plan our lives solely around our selves – our own needs,

wants, hopes and dreams, without paying attention to others, without paying attention to God.

All of our relationships – with our friends, our families, our colleagues – even those moments of relationship that happen when we stop and chat to a stranger on the street – they all begin by paying attention to someone. The dictionary defines attention as directing one's mind or energies – literally, to stretch toward. Our relationships begin by directing our mind and energy – by paying attention to – someone else: noticing the way they walk, the way they dress, the way they smile. And our relationship with God, too, grows and develops in the same way – simply by noticing and paying attention to God's presence in our world and in our lives.

That relationship with God can be developed and strengthened through prayer – but of course praying can sometimes seem the hardest, most impossible thing to do. I find it deeply reassuring that the disciples – the people who really knew Jesus, who hung out with him, who ate, and drank and socialised with him – even they were reduced to pleading 'Teach us to pray' (Luke 11:1). The mystic, Meister Eckhart, has said that if the only prayer you ever pray is 'thank you' – that's enough – and of course that's fine when we are feeling grateful and things are going well. But the possibility of saying 'thank you' may actually feel a bit hollow, or even downright impossible, when life is hard. Although I love the simplicity of Meister Eckhart's prayer, I really prefer the attitude of the American writer, Anne Lamott, who has suggested that there are three essential prayers – Help, Thanks and Wow. '*Wow!* is the prayer of praise and wonder – the prayer we offer when we might otherwise be utterly speechless. '*Thanks*' may be prayer as a huge outpouring of relief - when the test results come back clear, or the right person says 'yes' at the right time - or it may be a simple breath of thanks that we got a seat on the

tube. 'Help' can be the hardest prayer, as it means acknowledging that we are not in control – that we can't do this on our own – it's a way of surrendering ourselves to God.

Living in London in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it may feel hard to identify with the rich man in today's parable. I imagine that few of us have to worry about building a barn big enough for our grain store. But most of us probably do have a barn of some description. The barn may be in the shape of a home, or room, or cupboard that's full of material 'stuff'. But perhaps many of us keep other things stored away in metaphorical barns. They may be barns full of regret or resentments that have built up over the years. They may be barns full of doubt or anxiety, barns full of unresolved grief – or even barns full of self-loathing. But whatever we store up, whether it's possessions or emotional clutter, it can all become a burden and maintaining our barns, whether they are real or metaphorical, can take a huge amount of time and effort. Whatever we store in our barns distracts us from what really matters - our relationship with God. These are the barns that God invites us to dismantle and empty before him. He invites us to really hear the words of Matthew (11: 28) 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are

carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.' These are the barns that we can take to God and simply pray 'Help'.

God tells us, over and over again, that we are loved beyond measure - beyond our wildest and most improbable imagination. And we are all loved equally, just as we are - the fools and the sinners, the rich and the poor, the people surrounded by friends and those on their own. But God doesn't demand our love in return – because really, what sort of relationship would that be? Instead, God invites us – *he longs for us* – to hand over all the possessions and clutter, the worry, the regret and the resentment that weigh us down, knowing that we are loved utterly and completely, in all our messiness and confusion, just as we are.

'Being rich' toward God is an invitation to live differently – to find God in all things by paying attention - to others, to our world, and to ourselves. It's an invitation to follow the example of Jesus and to try to love without limits. And we will fail – over and over again – but in the process we have a hope of building up the kind of treasure that really matters.

Help, Thanks, Wow.

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