

WORLDLY FOOLISHNESS

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton
at Tomorata and Hakaru, Sunday 31 July 2016

Luke 12:13-21

[MW16-23]

Firstly, I invite you to consider and answer for yourself

- why was this man "foolish"?
- just what was his foolishness?
- please consider, then keep it to yourself and keep it in mind
- [pause for consideration]

Secondly, Jesus told parables to give us a glimpse of God's kingdom

- or to show the way that leads to abundant life
- and warn against the way that leads to impoverishment and death
- we've just heard how Jesus was asked to settle a disputed inheritance
- and typically, typically and annoyingly, he does not answer directly
- but tells this parable

How is this parable an answer to how you divide property amicably???

- let me just assure you that it is, it most definitely is
- it's just in typical Jesus fashion he does not directly say what to do
- rather he responds with something that allows, encourages, provokes people to work it out for themselves ...
- hence the parable usually entitled "The Rich Fool"

Parables give us a glimpse of 'something'

- they are not necessarily to be put under a microscope and explained
- but perhaps rather 'absorbed', more like a poem or piece of art
- speaking of art, here is the focus of my second point
- which is to illuminate this parable with a piece of art
- now I do not claim credit for making this connection
- I came across it on the internet!

Considering two brothers disagreeing over an inheritance

- and Jesus' response in the parable of "The Rich Fool"
- someone connected it with this (show picture, then pass around)

Have you heard of the New Yorker magazine? Back in the summer of 1998, the August edition (remember this is the northern hemisphere) had this cover of a beach scene. Four adult figures are towering over a little girl standing on the sand. Three of the adults have cell phones glued to their ears and are looking anxious, nervously pacing back and forth. The fourth adult not only has a cell phone to her ear, but is intently working on her laptop. The child however, in great contrast, has a smile on her face. She has a conch shell held to her ear and is listening to the soothing sound of the ocean. And the name of this cover painting? "Higher Calling".

"Higher calling" - which is linked to the essence of today's parable

- Jesus called the man in the parable a "fool"
- but hang on a minute, the guy is obviously no idiot or slouch
- he has more than a few clues
- notice too that Jesus did not criticise this farmer for all his wealth
- nor does he imply he got it dishonestly or treated his family and workers badly
- this man works hard and does well
- he is a good manager and may even have been the local 'farmer of the year'

The man looks ahead and plans for his retirement

- wise, prudent and nothing wrong with that again no rebuke from Jesus
- in fact this man should have had an enjoyable and satisfying life but, but, something is missing and for this reason Jesus calls him a "fool"!
- one person has commented:
"this man has a cell phone to his ear rather than a conch!"

Now is the time to remind yourself of your answer to why this man is a fool

- and compare it with what I say next ...

Notice the pronoun "I"

- depending on the translation, it appears in this short parable 6 or 7 times! only 5 verses and at least 6 "I's"
- what should *I* do, *I* don't have room, *I'll* tear down my barns *I'll* have room, *I'll* sit back and say to *myself*, live it up ...
- it's the "me" and "mine" that stand out
self-absorption, self-centredness, living only for oneself

In fact this parable reminds me of what I read once about Liberace

- the flamboyant piano player and entertainer who for a time was the highest paid performer in the world
- at his height he spent five million dollars a year when he died in 1987 he left behind eight overcrowded warehouses full of stuff that could not fit into any of his five fully furnished residences!
- an engaging, colourful, fool

What Jesus is on about here is greed

- and specifically greed which desensitises people blinds them to the higher calling, which is to look out for and care for one's neighbours
- nations, relationships and families have been devastated by this greed working too many hours, buying too much, running up debt relentlessly pursuing stimulation and novelty
- most of our political and financial scandals are rooted in this greed double-dipping, embezzlement, fraud
- yes, this greed might result in a "good life" but this good life crowds out the shared blessed life
- driving people to try be better off, instead of simply better making a living instead of a life

The commercialism and hype of our 21st century world plays on this

- advertising zeroes in on it constantly in our face about the "things" we must have
- and it's not just things but particular brands of things designer clothes, accessories and gadgets
- it's not enough just to have a pair of shoes, tee shirt, back pack or pen they must be the 'in' style and have the 'right' label

Like the teenage girl who left for school wearing one yellow and one orange sock. Her mother asked why she had two different coloured socks. The teenager responded, "I have a right to be different if I want to." Then she added, "Besides, all the kids at school are doing it."

Everybody is doing it?!

- there's a huge irony here
way back in the first century followers of the risen Christ, Christians were so dedicated to their calling, a Higher Calling that by definition they were notoriously counter-culture
- the rest of society looked at these upstart Christians and were astonished they were just so very different:
they lived extremely simply, shared their possessions, were openly charitable and even prepared to die for their faith
- that first century world was remarkably like our twenty first century one
amoral, pleasure seeking, selfish
and many were puzzled by, even as they admired
these people with different standards who engaged in communal work and prayer

In fact, knowing how much pressure people would face

- the early church made it very difficult for others to join
requiring years of preparation
- the whole point was to get the 'candidates' conditioned to live by a different code
a different set of values
and to learn how to endure being 'out of place'

Have you heard of the "Amish"?

- a large group of people that live in Pennsylvania in the USA
they dress simply and old fashioned style in black and white clothes
there are strict and traditional male and female roles
- they live and worship very simply
farm with horse and plough, use horse and buggy for transport
and generally have no use for 'modern' technology
- they are regarded as a harmless and intriguing oddity
but great for tourists

Well how about this:

- all the early Christians were the Amish of their day
with their quaint morals, communal living and simple lifestyle
- they were dancing to very different music
in a cell phone world they had conch shells to their ears
and heard something that enabled them to follow a higher calling

One commentator writes:

Alas, today, if Christian churches are faltering, it is because they have joined the secular parade, have themselves become greedy for money, power and prestige and no longer show us how to live. One thing is for sure: It is apparent we no longer have an "Amish reputation".

Let's be clear: there is nothing wrong with doing well and being well off

- nothing wrong at all with providing for the future
but there is definitely something wrong when the only benefit of this is "I"
- the benefits and fruits of this hard work are to be shared

I think Jesus said the man in the parable was "foolish"

- because he had a cell phone attached to his ear all the time
or maybe these days it is a blue tooth earpiece

- he has all the time and opportunity in the world to pick up a conch shell and listen to a different message
- but he never does, he never does and that is his foolishness

So how do we regain our “counter-culture” reputation?

- how do we listen to the conch shell and be true to our higher calling?
- how do we avoid that “worldly foolishness” of the man in the parable?

As a church it is extremely sobering to realise that we are responsible for huge assets

- the Wellsford Mission District balance sheet values us at 2.47 million dollars
- Mangawhai Mission District assets 1.5 to 2 million dollars?
- this should inform everything we do and how we do it
- we are to use our assets to bless our community

Then as individuals and families, here's something helpful and challenging I discovered in some writing on our parable by the priest, preacher and writer William J. Bausch who begins: “I have some half-dozen practical suggestions for you and myself”; and they are ...

First, share your bounty. Regularly give to the Foodbank, City Mission or similar programme.

Second, tithe. Give ten percent of your income to charity. And teach your children and grandchildren to do the same. If you give them ten dollars, say, “remember one dollar of that is for the poor.” When you give them a birthday present, say, “ Now you have a new present, which of your old ones are you going to give to a child who has none?”

Third, form the habit of asking: Do I really need this? Can I do without it? Could I give this money to a worthy cause?

Fourth, go through your drawers and wardrobe annually. If you did not wear a piece of clothing for a year, give it away.

Fifth, make the comparison test. Check how your charitable giving compares with other items like eating out, entertainment, hobbies, clothing.

Sixth, Christmas is coming! Before it overtakes you decide to set a strict limit to family and friends' gifts. You may then have a surplus to give to a worthy cause! Or perhaps you might make a donation in their name, like with the World Vision “buy a goat” programme?

So the takeaway thought, the homework for this week is

- to reflect on how you can avoid the trap of “worldly foolishness” that caught out the man in the parable
- put the conch to your ear and dance to the music of a higher calling

To help with this remember those six practical suggestions:

- share your bounty, tithe, ask the question: do I need this
- annually check for unused clothes
- compare your charitable giving with spending on luxuries
- transform excessive Christmas spending into Christmas giving

Then you will be rich in what matters to God

- and you will enjoy life as Jesus promised in all its fullness!

