

Who are you calling a Fool

Luke 12:13-22

There are few things worse than being called a fool. It is worse for instance than being called stupid. We can all do stupid things, when we are not thinking, or are distracted. But to be a fool is to pursue a course of action where it is clear that you should have chose otherwise. It is not an issue of lack of intellect, or opportunity, it is not the fault of circumstances but a continuation of bad choices which reflect very poorly on you. I do not like being called a fool and I would need to be very careful in calling someone else the same.

Yet today I run the risk of being called a fool. I am going to be saying things which seem to go against all that our culture seems to hold dear, some of what I will say will appear foolish to much of our world. Yet I must do this because in our reading today from Luke's gospel we have Jesus saying that we run the risk of being called a fool by God. One way or other we run the risk of being a fool.

Jesus teaching about greed, about possessions, about where we put our trust is confronting, challenging but ultimately liberating. If we do not heed this message who ultimately will be the fool?

A QUESTION, A WARNING AND A PARABLE LUKE 12:13-22

A Request v13-14

As Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem his fearless and challenging preaching has gathered a large crowd around him, when a voice comes from the crowd asking Jesus to intervene in a dispute over a will.

Jesus sharp response suggests that behind this seemingly innocent request lies wrong priorities particularly given his call to radical discipleship and trust in God's care. It also leads to teach about greed for Jesus knows that where there is a will, there is a relative.

A Warning v15

"Watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." Greed is, it seems to me a kind of forgotten sin or perhaps better a sin that we grow into as we grow up. We might tell a child to not be greedy if he goes for the largest piece of chocolate cake, but do we ever say it to an adult. Worse our society seems to encourage a "take what you can" attitude. Think about attitudes to gambling, or willingness to sue, what else are these things but greed?

This is already a challenge to us but Jesus goes on: "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Well you could have fooled Western civilisation. He who dies with the most wins, right. We are constantly bombarded with messages, and adverts which equate happiness, contentment, even existence with how much we have you got. Our government keeps telling us Australia is doing well because we, no longer citizens but consumers, spent our way out of recession. We may have been sick but we were cured with retail therapy. Well being in the nation of the nation is equate with economic growth

Our world believes this despite firm evidence to the contrary. In Japan between 1951 and 1991 real GDP per person increased six times yet there was no reported increase in life satisfaction. In the USA since 1946 there has been a fourfold increase of real income yet no increase in wellbeing. In fact the number of people describing themselves as very happy declined and there was around a 50% decrease in the number of people who were well satisfied with their financial situation. (From Growth Fetish, pp29-30)

In our own lives if we are to think of the times that we were truly happy, truly content I would suggest that it was unlikely that money or possessions were at the heart of those moments, but rather people. Yet we continue to chase possession and allow our greed to go unchecked, more fool us.

The Parable v16-21

Yet Jesus is not just interested in making a powerful sociological point although it is well worth making, and one that we should be continue to remind our politicians and opinion makers. Yet Jesus has a far more pointed message to bring.

He tells a famous parable, known as the Rich Fool, yet we need to be careful about that title and think about why is this person a fool. There is a successful farmer, lets call him, for sake of argument, Rupert. He has a good crop, business is good, so much so that his storage space has run out. Rupert then makes what seems a reasonable, even wise decision to build bigger barns, then he will be able to take it easy, to eat, drink and take over another newspaper, uhh be merry.

To this seemingly wise businessman God says categorically "You fool" and soon he will be a dead fool. Why is Rupert a fool? We can answer this in a number of ways.

Firstly the parable points out that after his death all his great wealth is of no use to him and there is the problem of who will get it. Jesus is returning to the issue of wills and a concern of Old Testament Wisdom literature. The man thinks he has planned so well yet death will bring those plans to an end and as many people have discovered the posthumous plans that you may have had for your possessions often go wrong and cause much dispute as Jesus has just been reminded. Rupert is a fool because he focuses on storing up his wealth yet his wealth will slip through his hands as his life slips away, it is true for us all. Who knows when our life will be demanded of us.

But more than a simple wisdom application Jesus shows that part of Rupert's foolishness was that he did not make God part of his planning. Psalm 14:1 tells us that a fool says in his heart "There is no God", and that is at the heart of this man's foolishness. Look again at his planning, it is all "I", "me", "my" and the beneficiary of his planning will be himself. One of the great dangers of wealth is that it turns us in on ourselves, it encourages self focus, self reliance and ultimately self delusion.

Jesus then tells us what we are to do. Rather than storing things up for ourselves, which we cannot keep, we should be rich towards God, who has the true riches of eternity at his disposal. If we live lifestyles which are marked by richness to God then although we like may look foolish to our world it ultimately is the way of wisdom.

DEALING WITH GREED

We hear this challenge of the transitory nature of life and of riches, it might inspire some guilt in us, but are likely to change? The hold that money and materialism has on us is strong and it is important that we realise that in dealing with greed we are in fact dealing with slavery and idolatry.

Francis Bacon wrote "If money be not thy servant, it will be thy master. The covetous man cannot so properly be said to possess wealth, as that it may be said to possess him." We all know this is true. I often am told that people because of a job, have to live a certain way often with sacrifices for relationships. I don't mean to sound callous but there are always choices, but the financially better option usually wins regardless of other consequences. Our reaction to Jesus teaching about greed can show how much in slavery we are. Jesus said you cannot serve two masters, God or money, he understood the greed is slavery.

Furthermore the Bible equates equating greed with idolatry (Colossians 3:5). And what we see around us really is nothing more than a highly institutionalised economic religion. Instead of thought for the day we have the stock market report, religious symbols are replaced with corporate logos, and memory verse cards become credit cards.

To kick against such slavery and idolatry, to renounce money as religion and be free will not come easy but this is what we are called to do.

Give some away

How can we make a start in doing this? “Money is like muck, not good except it be spread” said Francis Bacon or to perhaps misquote the Red Hot Chili Peppers we are to “Give it away, give it away, give it away now”

Listen to Paul’s words to Timothy “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

The rich are to be generous, they are to share their wealth with others, spending their earthly wealth while increasing their heavenly ledger. Some may think this doesn’t apply to them as they are not rich. We may not think of ourselves as rich yet so many around the world can only dream of the wealth that all of us have.

But also the Bible’s teaching remains the same for all socioeconomic groups. In Ephesians 4:28 Paul speaks to those who have been stealing, presumably because they are poor. He says “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands”. Now why is the person to work, to care for his family, to put money aside for when they are older, to not be a burden on society? No, this is the reason Paul gives “that he may have something to share with those in need.”

This is why we have money to care for those in need, to give it away. Can you do it? If I challenge each of you to make a \$100 donation to either World Vision or to support the Lakes in Damascus right now could you do it, what would be going on in your head. I expect that the reaction shows the powerful hold that money has on us.

If we are going to be generous or rich towards those in some way need to be like Rupert we need to make plans, but not to store up, but to give away.

This could be through

- Direct debit giving to your preferred charity and mission or Sponsor a child
- Buy a few extra tins each week to give to City Mission
- Plan to take friend out to lunch and don’t split the bill
- When we buy a coffee give a similar amount to the BCA

A Generous God

The way we spend our money will show where our treasure is, whether we will be rich towards the God. It will help when we remember how rich he has been towards us. God who has lavished love on us and given his most treasured possession for us and has promised to care for us eternally. With him lies true security and we show that we trust this rather than our money when we can model ourselves on God’s generosity.

Our family may not like, our financial planner may pull his hair out, we may struggle with something that looks foolish, but God says it is the way of wisdom, it builds relationships now, deepens our faith in God.

CONCLUSION

In 1956 a group of 5 young missionaries went to bring the gospel to Ecuadorean Indians and were martyred on a sand bar. One of those killed was called Jim Elliot and his journal was found. In it was written “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose” That young man had understood Jesus teaching perfectly.

Let us pray that we do too so that we will not be fools