

LUKE 12:13-21
BEING RICH – BUT IN WHAT WAY?

What kind of Scotland do we want? Apparently this question was asked by Crawford Beveridge on Thursday as he introduced the Budget Review and options for cuts in spending. This is a much bigger question than spending and budgets, but it lies at heart of what we want our nation to be: to be a people driven by fear and anxiety, people who are full of stress, whose view of life is about the accumulation of possessions and wealth and about how to live in their own space untouched by others in 6-star luxury?

What kind of Church do we want to have? A Church whose focus is on its own survival, or caught up in the minutiae of Church life? A Church that spends its life worrying about money, business plans, marketing campaigns, or fund-raising to keep doors open, but a Church that has sadly forgotten about God? In practical terms, a Church living life as if God doesn't exist?

What kind of community do we want to have? How do we create a community in which people talk to one another in street? Or do we want a community in which everyone has their own space and nothing and no-one is allowed to invade that space? That becomes a self-centred and selfish community, and that lacks spirit.

What kind of people do we want to be? This is about the way in which we think and where our hearts lie, about the values by which we live life. Is life all about what we have and own and how we manage to protect our wealth and accumulate even more? Or is life about something else, something deeper, something about faith and being 'rich towards God'?

The way in which we think about life is vital; it guides and controls everything else; the way we live, the way we speak, the way we deal with other people, the way we come to Church – the whole of life is shaped, governed and controlled by the way we think about life. There is no more pressing issue for Christians in the West today, because we are in severe danger of being totally side-tracked, and losing our cutting edge as Christians in the world, because our attitudes to life, and especially to wealth and possessions are becoming almost indistinguishable from those who have no Christian faith and do not profess Jesus as Lord. Christians are caught up in wealth accumulation, being and staying rich; Christians are driven and are stressed out and anxious and fearful for their money and possessions in same way as others.

Jesus spent more time in His teaching on the question of money, wealth and possessions than on any other issue when He was teaching His disciples. Now why should that be? Were there not bigger issues? What about Sabbath observance? Or new kinds of worship? No, money was the issue that we hear most about from His lips. Why? "Wealth can spoil our two noblest relationships. It can make us forget God and despise our fellow-human beings." (Stott *Issues* p.278) Jesus never says that money and possessions are bad things, but He does warn His disciples time and time again to be careful; these things will steal your heart! Is that not what we see in Scotland? In the last 40 years we have become a more and more wealthy nation and at same time have become less and less aware of our neighbours, and Jesus and Christian faith have become less and less relevant. Is that a coincidence? Or is the wisdom of Jesus revealed?

In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus challenges us in two ways about the way we think. The issue happens to be money and possessions, but deep down the real issue is about the way in which people think about life. The first is an incident when a man in the crowd wanted Jesus to settle an argument between him and his brother: "*Teacher...*" (12:13) There are two ways of looking at this request: first, that this man had a genuine grievance and that his brother was refusing to give him a share that was due

to him; these disputes were brought to rabbis to resolve. Or secondly, this man was trying to use Jesus as a lever to get one over on his brother and that he would go back to his brother saying 'the rabbi says...' We don't know which way to understand the man's question and in a sense it doesn't matter. because whichever way we take it, the issue at the heart of the story is greed, as far as Jesus is concerned: if the brother is refusing to share, then the greed is his because he is unwilling to give up money that doesn't belong to him; if the man asking is trying to use Jesus as a lever to get money that may not belong to him, then the greed is his for trying to get money under false pretences. Whichever way we look at it, here is a family consumed by and driven apart by greed!

Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter. What kind of life do you want? What kind of person do you want to be? *"Watch out!..." (12:15)* He sees the danger of this man's attitude, that greed for wealth has become all-consuming and he has lost something or is in danger of losing something very important. Life is about more than what we have and what we own. When Christians become rich, it is so easy to forget that; it is so easy to lose the edge that Jesus called us to have, our attitudes to be different from the way the world thinks; our hearts lie in the same place as people with no faith.

Then Jesus told a parable. Remember parables have one point to them; Jesus told parables so that we might learn one thing about God or life. In this parable, Jesus tells the story of a farmer, a good, successful farmer, whose land was well-worked and produced good crops. In fact, the land kept producing better and better crops year after year. This made the farmer think: how could he store this increasing crop to keep it safe for future use? So he decided to pull down the barns that he already had and then build new barns, bigger ones, so that he would be able to store all of his goods and grain. This is how Jesus put the man's attitudes into words: *"I'll say..." (12:19)* Significantly, 11 times man uses the word 'I' or 'my' - the man is completely focussed on himself and on his wealth.

But that is not the end of the story because that very night the man died. What happened then to all of his wealth? Other people got it. We are left to presume that his family would have inherited it, but he couldn't enjoy it. *"I hated..." (Ecc 2:18f)* the wise man in the book of Ecclesiastes looks at every aspect of life and sees something of the frustration that every person feels about many of these issues; here, the man has worked hard, but he must leave his wealth to someone else, one who comes after; he is not sure whether the one who comes after is wise or foolish, but either way someone else will have control of this wealth that the wise man has accumulated. He sees something futile in a life that is simply caught up only in question of accumulation of wealth and possessions. By contrast, I saw something on a motorbike number-plate a couple of years ago "spending the kids' inheritance"!

The point of the parable is not found in what the man is, but in what this man is not! *"This is..." (12:21)* This is an intriguing phrase 'rich towards God' – what does it mean? It is about faith and generosity. The same man in this parable, being rich towards God would have been different in 2 ways: first of all, he would have thanked God for His gift of grain and it would not have been his grain, but grain that God had given him, and he would be a steward of God's gift. Secondly, he would have been generous to others and given the surplus away; he had enough for his own needs so he could give the rest away; there will be more next year. So this sense of thankfulness to God and generosity to others would have made this man richer in his spirit and would have made his life fuller and deeper. Faith in God and love for others are qualities that make us rich beyond measure and rich in our relationship with God.

So what do we do? We need to be “free of anything and everything which distracts from the loving service of God and others.” (Stott *Issues* p.280) There is a way of thinking that we need to put off: a way of thinking that is preoccupied with money, wealth and possessions. Money is not bad; we need money to live; but life does not consist in wealth and possessions. We need to put off the way of thinking that concentrates on being wealthy, that drives people on to have more and more; if we see that as a bad thing in society itself, then we need to make sure that Church models a different way. Some of churches in this city with the highest levels of giving have never done a fundraising event in their lives because it is seen as more important to persuade people of the richness of God’s blessing on their lives and that to be generous is simply part of their ongoing life of faith and discipleship to Jesus. 6 weeks ago, I asked for £1k to take to Cambodia and some people told me I was mad; we’d never get it. My simple hope, my faith was that God would inspire you to give; by time we left 3 weeks ago, that £1k had become almost £2.5K

“*Set your...*” (Col 3:1-4) Here is a totally different way of thinking. “Christ is your life”. All that we are comes from Christ; all that we have comes from Christ; all our hopes and aspirations centre on Christ. He is our Saviour, He gives us life, He forgives sins, He brings hope to our hearts, He blesses us with every spiritual blessing. He is Lord; He inspires our faith; He teaches us and guides us through life; His wisdom shapes our view of life; His attitudes shape the way we see the world and the way we treat other people. Or should! Because Christ is our life, then the way we live should be full of faith, trusting God, full of love and generosity to others, full of good deeds and concern for world – all of these are qualities we see in Jesus and His teaching.

Where will our heart lie? Where will the heart of Scotland lie? With Christ? Where will the heart of our community lie? With faith and generous love? Where will the heart of the Church lie? Centred on Christ, trusting God? Where will our hearts lie as individuals? With our wealth and possessions or with Christ? As radical disciples, living distinctive lifestyles, modelling a different set of values to world? Everything that stops us from loving God with an undying love, everything that stops us from following Jesus wholeheartedly, everything that prevents us from loving others freely and generously – be rid of it. Christ is our life – let all that we are, all that we think, all that we speak, all that we do, be centred on Christ.