

In the Gospels we get just two parables which Jesus told against the rich. There is the story of the rich man (sometimes called Dives) and the beggar Lazarus, who lay at his gate, and there is this story of the wealthy farmer. They represent two different traditions in Jewish religious teaching, the prophetic tradition and the wisdom tradition. The first, the story of Dives and Lazarus, from the prophetic tradition, is about the sinfulness of excessive consumption in the face of poverty. Today's story, in the wisdom tradition, is about the folly of accumulation. And in the wisdom tradition, foolishness is not merely stupidity, it is an obstinate disregard for God, exactly the opposite of the wisdom that flows from the fear of God - the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The story begins with a man in the crowd asking Jesus to give a judgement about a family dispute. The father has died and left everything jointly to his sons - a common practice - they are to inherit jointly, everything is to be kept together. Like the Prodigal Son in another story, this son wants his share and wants it for himself independently of his brother. Instead of the

inheritance being divided, the joint inheritance has divided the family. The story of the rich farmer follows.

He is blessed with an abundance of crops. His problem is not the obvious one - what to do with his harvest - at a time when hunger frequently stalked the land. It never occurs to him to do anything with his crops except keep them. The problem for the land owner is where to put his crops, and the solution is a major building project on his farm. He talks to himself - I have no place; I will do this; I will pull down; I will build; I will store; and I will say to my soul - and what does he say to his soul? - 'Eat, drink and be merry' - and do you notice what is missing? The ancient proverb - certainly around at this time - was, is - eat, drink, be merry, for tomorrow we must die'. The farmer leaves out the last bit. He believes he has everything he needs for the good years ahead. 'You have ample goods laid up for many years'. He is living in his own world, and he thinks he is master of it. He is in charge of his future - he cannot see that he is not in control. He might have worked hard for his harvest, but he couldn't control it. Across Africa we see today huge swathes of land where peasant farmers work hard and reap no harvest. You cannot control wind, rain, sunshine, insects. The rich man does

not see that this bountiful harvest is, in fact, a gift. It has been given to him.

The same goes for all of us. To a limited extent we make our lives for ourselves, but only on the basis of what has been given to us; what we owe to family, friends, teachers, circumstances, things which simply happen to us - good fortune, bad luck or however we choose to interpret things we cannot engineer or control for ourselves.

'If you are born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others. If you're black, you're treated more harshly by the criminal justice system than if you're white. If you are a white working class boy, you're less likely than anyone else in Britain to go to university. If you're at a state school, you're less likely to reach the top professions than if you are educated privately. If you are a woman, you will earn less than a man. If you suffer from mental health problems, there's not enough help to hand; and if you are young, you'll find it harder than ever before to own your own home.'

We like to think, as the farmer did, that we write our own story but clearly we don't; much of it is written by other people, other circumstances over which we have no control, by what happens to

us, not just by what we make happen. It is the affluent who most easily forget this, because they feel insured against the disasters of life. People living on the edge of destitution are much more aware of how dependant they are on what happens to them.

So the farmer is ready to enjoy what he believes is his by right, forgetting that it is gifted- and then the shock - for the first and only time in a parable God himself appears. 'You fool' 'You fool' He could have said 'You idiot' - from the Greek *idiotes*, which means the one who is alone. He certainly is alone. No one else appears in the story - it is I, I, I, and my, my, my - my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my soul. 'You fool. This night your life is demanded of you' - although, really, he is already dead, dead to other people, dead to the world, dead to God. That is why he is an idiot, the one who is alone. He does not share any of his goods with others, or any part of himself. He doesn't even invite neighbours to help him celebrate. He sits and drinks alone. He doesn't even share his conversation. He talks to himself. He is very rich, he has much wealth, but his life is impoverished in human terms - and most importantly, he is not rich towards God.

It goes without saying that the society in which we live is also not rich towards God. That life consists in what we can get and keep and spend, especially spend, is probably the loudest of the voices we hear in our culture. Two hundred years ago William Wordsworth told us that 'getting and spending we lay waste our lives', but we still aren't listening. The rich fool's philosophy encourages us to think that we need a constant supply of new material possessions, new ways to eat, drink, be merry - and if the things we acquire don't satisfy, just wait a while; there will be something else new on the market. It is, as the Preacher in the Book Ecclesiastes says 'Vanity of vanities - and a chasing after wind'. The fool - the idiot - suddenly realises that, because of the intervention of God, he is not in control of his own story. Through this parable we experience the rich fool's shock at second hand. The divine intervention which ended his story so unexpectedly can be for us an intervention which ends - not our story - but our attempt to write our story ourselves. Ultimately, we are not in control, and sometimes, we are not even in charge. Which is why St Paul tells us to set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, which the Teacher in Ecclesiastes tells us are the vanity of vanities and a chasing

after wind; and the psalmist tells us that 'we can never ransom ourselves, or deliver to God the price of our life; For the ransom of our life is so great' - and that ransom has been paid by Jesus. So perhaps we should listen to what he has to say.