

## The Parable of the Barns

*Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23*

*Colossians 3:1-11*

*Luke 12:13-21*

**MOST FAMILY DISPUTES** seem to come down to one of two things: money or sex. Today it's money. In fact it's about a dispute over a will. A dispute over an inheritance. Perhaps the kind of dispute you have read about in the newspaper. Perhaps a kind of dispute that has happened in your family or amongst some of your friends.

**IT WOULD SEEM THAT JESUS** has gained something of a reputation as a teacher, a rabbi, so much so that people want him to act as a kind of judge. But he doesn't want to get involved. In fact he seems to have little interest in matters of justice between two people who are probably quite well-provided for already. What grabs his attention is not the legalistic dispute with which he is presented, but the spiritual attitudes that lie behind the dispute. What Jesus sees is two people whose relationship is being destroyed by a mutual love for material things. Their inheritance is more important to both of them than the quality of their relationship. They are willing to sacrifice their relationship for the sake of their money.

**PERHAPS NOT SURPRISINGLY THIS IS THE CUE FOR HIM TO TELL A PARABLE.**

It's known as the Parable of the Barns. I guess we all know of people who have retired with great plans: the holidays they have wanted to go on; the home improvements; the garden landscaping. And I guess we all know of people who have retired with great plans and immediately taken ill and died. And to be honest I'm sure we've all been quite shocked. We have all said, and believed, that it is a terrible tragedy that life should be cut short in such a manner. Jesus does not show that kind of sympathy. In fact he reports the words of an equally unsympathetic God as being,

You fool! This is very night your life is being demanded of you.

Luke 12:21

**THE MORAL OF THIS STORY** is usually translated as being that we should store up 'treasure in heaven'; the translation we heard today says that 'we should be rich towards God'. What can this mean in practical terms? I want to suggest three possible out workings of this spiritual principle.

**THE FIRST IS THAT A FUNDAMENTAL DISCIPLINE FOR ANY CHRISTIAN** is personal giving. The reason that Christians give their money away is that at heart we are aware that it comes from God. This understanding is deeply embedded in the Jewish scriptures beginning with the opening chapter of Genesis where the author makes it very clear that God has made the world and we are called to be stewards of it. But for Jewish people it went beyond that. The key event of their history was the Exodus, when they were rescued from slavery in Egypt. And one of the features of the Old Testament writings that follow the Exodus is that the Jewish people are continually reminded of this event. And not only of the event but also of its significance: it was God who rescued them. They owe their freedom to God. They owe their lives to God. If everything they have they owed to God, how can they possibly not be generous with it?

**AS THEY ENTER THE PROMISED LAND**, God tells his people how they are to live in it. One of the requirements is that they offer the first fruits of each harvest to him. And when the priest offers the first fruits he is to repeat this Creed

My father was wandering Aramaean  
who went down to Egypt with a small group of men  
and stayed there until he became  
a great powerful and numerous nation.  
The Egyptians ill-treated us, they oppressed us  
and inflicted harsh slavery on us,  
but we called upon the Lord God of our ancestors.  
The Lord heard a voice and saw  
our misery, our toil and our oppression;  
and the Lord brought us out of Egypt  
with mighty hand and outstretched arm,  
with great terror and with signs and wonders.  
He brought us here and has given us this country,  
a country flowing with milk and honey.  
Hence, I now bring the first fruits of the soil  
that you Lord have given me.

Deuteronomy 26:6-10.

**AS CHRISTIANS WE, TOO, CELEBRATE THE EXODUS** albeit in not quite the same way as the Jews. It gets a particular mention on two occasions. The most important is that at the Easter Vigil when we are reminded that just

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as the Jews were delivered from physical slavery in Egypt, so we are now delivered from spiritual slavery to sin, to Satan, by the death of Jesus on the cross. That's the most important reminder, but it is heard only once a year. But every time we witness a baptism we hear the same story. We are reminded that just as Israel was rescued from slavery through the waters of the Red Sea, so we are rescued from slavery through the waters of baptism. St Paul makes this connection writing to the Corinthians. He is writing to them about personal giving: it reads like a letter from an Archdeacon! He says this:

You are well aware of the generosity  
which our Lord Jesus Christ had:  
although he was rich, he became poor for your sake  
so that you should become rich through his poverty.

2 Corinthians 8:9.

**THERE IS A LITTLE DETAIL ABOUT THE COMMANDMENT TO MOSES** that we should notice. What the Israelites are commanded to offer to God is the 'first fruit' of the harvest. They give to God before they take for themselves. Giving money away isn't about seeing what's left when we've spent it on ourselves: we start by deciding how much we are going to give back to God and then we live on the rest. Again Paul gave some very practical advice to the Corinthians:

now about the collection for Gods holy people;  
on the first day of the week, each of you  
should put aside and reserve as much as each can spare.

1 Corinthians 16:2

**THE SECOND PRINCIPLE IS THAT IN SPENDING OUR MONEY** getting a bargain should not necessarily be a priority. We have seen this principle in action for many years in Fairtrade produce. Fairtrade is based on the assumption that in trading relationships between wealthy developed countries and poor agricultural countries, power is skewed towards the latter, towards us. Those who are already poor get a poor deal. Fairtrade is an attempt to correct this. For many years, Fairtrade goods were available at the back of churches; but things have moved on and it is now possible to buy many

Fairtrade goods in mainstream supermarkets. The churches have been successful in raising awareness that paying a fair price maybe a better option for Christians than getting a good deal. But of course we are now aware that this kind of principle applies in many other areas of trade: some Christians will choose to buy food that is organic; some will choose to buy vegetarian or even vegan food; others may choose to buy food that is been locally sourced and not transported over thousands of miles. I am not sure there is any one Christian option; but I am sure that we are called to consider the moral implications of our purchases and not simply the financial ones.

**THE THIRD PRINCIPAL CONCERN IS HOW SPEND OUR VOTES.** Politicians often appeal to our lowest instincts. Sometimes election campaigns feel like mass bribery. Politicians seem to compete with one another to offer us material incentives: higher pensions; lower taxes; more police officers; more doctors; more teachers; more of everything! The assumption politicians seem to make is that each of us will cast of those according to what we are going to get out of it. So if I am a pensioner I will vote for higher pensions, free care home places and free TV licences. But if I'm a young parent I will vote for higher child credit and more nursery places.

**I DO NOT THINK THAT IS AN APPROPRIATE CHRISTIAN APPROACH.** As Christians we should ask who is in most need. In the law of Moses it was 'widows, orphans and foreigners'. In Jesus's Parable of the Sheep and the Goats it was those who are hungry, those who are thirsty, those who were naked, and those who are in prison. Who are these people now? And which political party is offering to care for them? Once we know the answer to that question, we know who we should vote for. And it may or may not be the party that will do the most for me.

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