

Jesus is teaching his disciples amid a crowd of several thousand when an unnamed individual interrupts with a demand for Jesus to arbitrate on an inheritance dispute. As we heard in the Deuteronomy reading, according to Mosaic Law, favouritism was irrelevant, an elder son received double that of a younger son. But if there was a dispute, it was usually settled by a rabbi, which is presumably why the man approached Jesus. But here Jesus refuses to do so. Instead, he offers teaching for everyone with a short parable about the so-called rich fool which paints a vivid image of the dangers of wealth accumulation for its own sake.

Jesus describes a farmer who is already rich and has such a bumper harvest that he can't fit it all into his existing storage facilities. The farmer's solution is to tear down his barns and replace them with bigger ones and having done so, sit back to enjoy the fruits of his labour by, in his own words: "take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry".

And what is wrong with that, you might ask? After all, the financial pages in The Times and Telegraph frequently contain articles advocating exactly that. Work hard and reap the benefits, with the modern-day harvest equivalents being prudent management of one's salary, savings, investments, and pensions. And indeed, why not celebrate the event? Because there are any number of feasts and parties throughout the bible giving ample evidence supporting the practice of celebrating the harvest or rejoicing at signs of good fortune.

Well, yes there are - and saving for future material needs is one component of prudent and proper stewardship of God's bounty. So far we have raised over a million pounds towards a once in a lifetime refurbishment of this church building and facilities which we anticipate starting early next year. And when it's complete, not only will it be the legacy to our children and future generations but also the location of our celebration where if I have any say in the matter, we will certainly eat, drink and be merry.

Yet, there is one inescapable difference between what we plan to do and what the rich fool did. It is called imbedded motivation. Throughout, and from its inception, our project was always meant to give glory to God. To help us not only to love our neighbour and local community as ourselves in practical ways but also to lead any and all back to the glorious generosity and grace of God.

Put simply, and I hope with the correct degree of humility. We are not doing this for ourselves, but for others. That is in stark contrast to the motivation of the rich fool, demonstrated by his relentless use of the first-person pronouns "I", and "my". In just two verses, he uses those words on no less than 10 occasions. And it is interesting to note that this rich man only ever talks to *himself*! His monologue is a sign of the man's basic problem: he neither sees nor cares for anybody but his own self.

He is totally absorbed with himself. He has no thought whatsoever in using the abundance to help others; no expression of gratitude for his good fortune; no recognition of God at all. It's almost as if he's fallen prey to worshipping that unholy trinity of "me, myself, and I". And I must confess I didn't truly understand that until Jane and I joined a Tearfund mission trip to Uganda 12 years ago when I was bowled over by the humbling generosity of our village hosts who insisted on treating all in our party like royalty wherever we went.

In every single village a feast was prepared in our honour and to welcome us. Feasts which we subsequently learned not only surpassed any other meal they themselves would eat that year but also and tellingly, every single household in the village, including those where there was no income, had made a contribution to what was served. To them, sharing out of subsistence, not out of abundance was the best way of praising God for his blessing on them.

Perhaps because of their material poverty they had fewer illusions about the efficacy of material goods to save or transform them. But they certainly continue to serve as a reminder to me about two additional things in the reading. Firstly, that God is the creator of food which sustains life. Theologically speaking, we say that it is through divine providence that the harvest is abundant, yet this is ignored by the rich fool who focusses entirely on the benefit he will receive. There's not even a simple thank you in there.

Secondly, the man ignores entirely the fact that death is inevitable, and no amount of wealth or possessions will ever prevent that happening. That was understood by those Ugandan villagers. After all, as my dear grandma always said – there are no pockets in a shroud.

What that means is that no amount of wealth can protect us from a genetically inherited disease, for instance, or from a tragic accident. No amount of wealth can keep our relationships healthy and our families from falling apart. In fact, wealth and property can easily drive a wedge between family members, as in the case of the brothers fighting over their inheritance at the beginning of this text.

More importantly, no amount of wealth can secure our lives with God. In fact, Jesus repeatedly warns that wealth can get in the way of our relationship with God. It is not that God doesn't want us to save for retirement or future needs. It is not that God doesn't want us to "eat, drink, and be merry" and enjoy what he has given us. After all, we know from the Gospels that Jesus spent time eating and drinking with people and enjoying life. But Jesus was also clear about where his true security lay. His – and our - Father who is in heaven.

And that takes courage. To stand out from the crowd. To live out our daily prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in. In response to what I've just said, let's ask God to strengthen us, unlike the rich man, to live out our lives courageously. Please stand.

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 28 September 2025