

## The Deadliest Sin?

Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Liam and Noel – brothers and rivals.

In our reading today [Luke 12. 13-21], we encounter two such brothers, at war over that very divisive issue of inheritance. The aggrieved brother tries to publicly shame the other by demanding that Jesus, the rabbi, sort this out. Understandably, Jesus refuses to play go-between. 'That's none of my business,' he says, and then proceeds to tell one of his trademark stories; a parable, not about injustice but about greed.

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, greed was voted the deadliest in a poll conducted by the Economist magazine. Interestingly, in another poll, when asked which of the Big Seven people were happy to put their hand up to, greed came last. It seems that we recognise greed in others, but not always in ourselves.

Back in 1987, Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas's character in the movie Wall Street) famously declared that 'Greed is Good, greed is right, greed works, greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, love, knowledge, has marked the upwards surge of mankind'.

A very clever and very manipulative speech trying to justify the unjustifiable by suggesting that greed is a necessary driver in the success of our species. Ironic really, considering what human greed has done to us as a species and to the planet we inhabit.

Greed is a kind of hunger, except it's a hunger that's never satisfied. It drives us to want more, and more. And we all know, of course, that more and more doesn't work; that the best things in life aren't things, but that doesn't seem to stop us, stop me, from wanting more, owning more, upgrading more.

You might know that Jesus talked a heck of a lot about money. Why? Well, money in itself, of course, is neutral; our attitude to money, on the other hand, and to what we possess, tells us a great deal about who we really are and where our hearts really lie.

In his story, Jesus seems to turn the spotlight back on the aggrieved brother. A successful farmer, he says, having built an empire, retires and says to himself, 'Relax, sit back, enjoy, eat; drink and be merry'. And, to us and the audience at the time (who would have seen this as a blessing from God) and for the aggrieved brother, that's the Dream; the ultimate goal.

Except, what the retired farmer doesn't know is that that same night, a heart attack would take it all away. And in the parable God's response is, 'You fool'.

It is a cautionary tale about the dangers of stockpiling, the dangers of greed, reminding us that life is short and unpredictable, so invest in what really matters. And, for Jesus, what really matters is being '*rich before God*'. But what exactly does that mean?

For the writer Barbara Brown Taylor, being rich before God is connected with a sense of purpose; with what our lives are for. In her own exploration of this parable she says:

"My guess is that every person here has a different purpose, a different way of being rich toward God. Some people really do need to quit their soul deadening jobs and find work that is richer in purpose. But a whole lot of other people could wake up to the purpose that is available to them in their lives right now. One of the saddest things in the world is to talk with someone who believes that what he or she does is small change in God's pocket, not even worth counting. As far as I can tell, there is no such thing.

"The world is in terrific need of mending, and no stitch is too small. As

discerning Christians have been discovering for almost two thousand years now, it is possible to pick up a straw off the floor for the love of God. It is just as possible, I believe, to diaper a baby, or roof a house, or simply to sit in a wheelchair and be a friend for the love of God.

“The important thing,” she goes on to say, “is to sense how your life and God’s life are flowing in the same direction—and if you are clear that they are not, then to do something about it. Get yourself a purpose as soon as you can—one that helps God mend the world, and mends you while you are at it—maybe even one that costs you more than a new laptop or a new car but which promises to do you a whole lot more good when God shakes you awake in the middle of the night so that you can spend some quiet time thinking about what your life is worth.”

Our life’s worth is, as we know, not measured by our bank account, our success rating; our desirability, or respectability. Our life’s worth is measured in terms of our purpose; of how much our life mends the lives of others.

Another way of thinking about being rich before God is to value what God values. And if we want to know what God values we need look no further than some of the other parables – the **sacrifice** of the widow’s mite – the **humility** of the publican’s prayer – the **generosity** of the vineyard boss – the **openheartedness** of the banquet-maker – the **devotion** of the good shepherd – **trust** the size of a mustard seed. The rich-list goes on. This sacrifice, humility, generosity, openheartedness, devotion, trust etc; these have eternal value because they leave a legacy, their inheritance lives on long after we die.

Greed, I think, is so often a symptom of fear. We hold too tightly what we fear to lose. And the more we have, of course, the more there is to lose. We tell ourselves that the more we can store up, the bigger our barns, the safer we will be, which, as the parable reminds us, just isn’t true.

Greed is also fuelled by an emptiness and that emptiness can never be met through money or stuff. Ironically, it can only be met, not through gaining but

through giving; through greed's opposite; surrender. Surrender, explains Richard Rohr, isn't a 'giving up', it's a 'giving to'. It's 'giving ourselves to the moment, the situation, the person in front of us... giving ourselves to God.'

We surrender our emptiness and, in the process, discover God's fullness. Surrender is the antidote to greed. As we let go to God what we cling too tightly to, as we give ourselves to each moment, each situation, each person, they each reveal their riches, revealing how rich we already are. When we surrender our fear and our emptiness to God, when we evict that squatter greed, it allows God the space in which to set up home. And when God is at home in us, we can never feel poor or empty again.

Jesus famously said, 'What good is it if you gain the whole world, yet lose your own soul?'

The farmer in the story gained an empire but lost both soul and empire. The brother with the inheritance issues, consumed with gaining what he felt was his due, was also at risk; at risk of being eaten by jealousy; at risk of losing sight of the riches he already had -at risk of losing his relationship with his brother.

When our lives are driven by the hunger for money; the hunger for more, when our possessions begin to possess us, when jealousy takes hold; our souls become increasingly impoverished; we become poor before God.

This has been an uncomfortable sermon to write, if I'm honest, because its message, actually, is for me. I, like many, don't want to put my hand up to the hold greed has on me. Rather than trying to justify myself, however, or beat myself up, I've decided that the best way through greed for me is to try to open my eyes more to the riches I already have; to practise the ancient art of appreciation; to remind myself, moment by moment, that if I have breath, if I have shelter, if I have food and drink, if I have love in my life, if I am safe in God; I am rich... it is enough. I am enough.