

**Eat, drink and be merry**

*Hosea 11:1-11; Luke 12:13-21*

When thinking about sermons, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth is reputed to have said: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” As I began thinking about this week’s sermon, there were rich pickings to be had.

The early days of last week’s news was dominated by the financial antics around Sir Philip Green and the appalling story around the collapse of BHS and the devastating blow to those who had pensions with that company set against the alleged millions that appear to have been appropriated by the Green family. The damning report by a House of Commons select committee on the British Home Store affair challenged every form of ethical, political and business fibre in the nation’s body. How could this be fair? How could this be right? How could this have happened?

Today’s parable of the rich fool building his bigger barns to store his crops might not fit the Philip Green BHS story exactly, just in case he’s reading this sermon and planning to sue me and just about everyone else who has crossed his path; but the principle of the amassing and management of wealth, in the face of chronic hardship and suffering caused by the amassing and management of that wealth, comes perilously close to the story Jesus told. “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.’” Whilst, as things stand, eleven thousand people have lost their jobs, and twenty thousand more have had their pensions ruined because of a £571M shortfall in the BHS pension fund. Things may yet change, but they haven’t yet.

If God were to say, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” what kind of monument would be left behind by Philip Green and the others linked to this ethical and moral morass?

When the economy faltering, as it is after Brexit; when people are facing uncertain times, the issue of money becomes complex and challenging. Jesus’ teaching is unsettling. We are not to

amass it and hoard it. We are, with wisdom, to use it and share it. The parable is not told against good business and good entrepreneurs. It is told against those who have much and take little or no thought to the needs of others, or the wider work of God's Kingdom. It applies not only to those who have much, but those who have little. It is about the rich man's hoarding, and the widow's mite being shared. It is about a vision for the future, with God, and with God's children, working together to build something more generous, more imaginative, more open-hearted, more like God's Kingdom. The American university vice president James W Frick once said, "Don't tell me where your priorities are. Show me where you spend your money and I'll tell you what they are."

What kind of monuments are we building? How big is our vision for the future?

The BHS story was big enough, but it was eclipsed, terribly, by something bigger, the murder of Fr. Jacques Hamel, the 84-year-old priest. He was in his church saying morning mass and was attacked by two young men. All the reports about this old French priest are of a quiet, simple man, who did nothing to draw attention to himself. His community treasured him. He was killed going about his daily duties, quietly, faithfully. He had no intention, I believe, of being a saint, or a martyr, but simply sought to do the little he could in the best way he could. He had known no other life.

In his shocking death, what kind of monument does he leave behind? He had built no barns; he would have had no great wealth to store; but his life, and his tragic death, tells us something. His soul was required of him, and even in the awful manner of his departing life, a faithful man carrying out his duties in the face of the random terrorism is surely a powerful witness in these dark days for many. The UK police have encouraged churches to be alert but not alarmed. I was asked what my response was to this awful event, and it is this: The only Church response to the murder of Fr. Jacques Hamel: doors open, welcome assured, grace extended. Business as usual. Come and visit us. We go about our business, on Sundays and during the week. We are required, simply, to live faithfully, and openly, and generously. None of us knows when our souls will be required of us, so best to live as if we could be gone at any moment. To live in the

moment of God's grace, not uncaring about the future, not failing to plan, not refusing to look ahead, but believing that all we do is not building barns, or adding treasure to ourselves, but being rich towards God, which means being rich towards God's children through our words, our thoughts, our actions.

It means not giving into despair, or grief, or anger, or threats, and certainly not giving into fear. It means, as Michelle Obama said last week at the Democratic Conference in Philadelphia, "When people go low, we go high. We don't stoop to their level."<sup>i</sup>

It means being like the God of Hosea who cannot and will not give up on His children, no matter how far they go from Him, no matter how often they turn from Him. This God of hope, Who still judges, but still shows mercy; so that some time, we, His children, might see, and return, and follow.

How big is your vision for the future? Who are you building for, and what do you plan to build? What are the resources that you think you will need, and how will you deploy them? It is what lies at the heart of our own plans and hopes for our new hall extension. We must build with a generous heart for ourselves and for our community; we build with an inclusive and welcoming heart for ourselves and for our community; we build with a **hopeful** heart for ourselves and for our community. If we, as the followers of Jesus, cannot be hopeful, who can be hopeful? "Hope is not a feeling. Hope is a decision."<sup>ii</sup>

"The man in the parable and the people who emulate his pattern of life are fools for leading isolated, self-absorbed lives, because everything they have given themselves ends with death. Life is not had by the possessions one has. Life and possessions are a gift of God to be used to advance God's agenda of care and compassion, precisely for those who lack resources to provide for themselves."<sup>iii</sup>

Charles Dickens' story of *A Christmas Carol* tells us about Ebenezer Scrooge – a man not dissimilar to the rich man in the parable. Scrooge gets to see himself past, present and future and is horrified by what he sees. He undergoes a wonderful transformation into someone who uses his wealth to bring joy to others. This 1843 story has been retold several times, but it's

actually Jesus' two thousand year old story that touches the heart of the matter for most of us. Dickens' story, like Jesus' story, ends with the invitation to be generous, not just with our money, but with our time, with our talents, with the investment of our lives to make a difference for good.

What are we building; who are we building for; why are we building; how are we building? How big is our vision of the future, and who do we hope to welcome into that future through our kindness, generosity and love.

A British businessman needs to think about this; and French priest lived this. But what about us?

“At the evening of our lives, we shall be judged on our love alone.”<sup>iv</sup>

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Michelle Obama

<sup>ii</sup> Jim Wallis

<sup>iii</sup> Richard P Carlson, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3

<sup>iv</sup> St John of the Cross