

Year C Proper 13

Luke 12:13-21

The following brief article appeared on the BBC news website last month.

“Fifty years ago this week Barclaycard issued the first credit cards in the UK. Half a century on, consumers are used to a range of convenient ways to pay, but back in 1966 there was a feeling of change when people tried to brandish their exciting new plastic cards. "When it arrived I didn't really know what it was," admitted Liz Hodgkinson, who

was a fresh-faced 22-year-old just out of university.

The company sent out some 1.25 million plastic cards to Barclays customers from 29 June 1966 and while some sent them back or never used them, many, like Liz, a writer, embraced the new way of paying.

While the introduction of plastic in 1966 may have given cardholders like Liz a feeling of confidence, the evolution of the credit card also meant the danger of getting into debt very much became a reality.

"I was elated to get an Access card when I was aged 18," said Karen Wake, 55, a

pension expert. But her happiness didn't last. "By the age of 25 I had built up £30,000 worth of debt. "I worked hard to pay it off in five to six years and have had no debt since then," she said. "Despite the fact I now work in the financial services industry, that didn't equip me to manage my finances at a young age."

Today, many people happily use credit cards for convenience - often earning rewards or cash back - while paying the balance off every month to ensure there are no charges.

But overspending and building up long-term debt remain big problems. Mike O'Connor,

chief executive of the debt charity Step Change, says: "The average credit card debt we see is £8,403 and last year we dealt with more than 200,000 people with £1.7bn of credit card debts."¹

Oh dear, convenient and useful, but very dangerous. Credit cards are dangerous because they facilitate the consumer driven culture which encourages people to purchase things they do not need. Remember last week when we looked at the Lord's Prayer we noted Jesus' encouragement to pray confidently, boldly for what you need; for

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-36518248>

what you need, not what you want, and there is a difference. Once desire trumps need and exceeds it, then there is trouble.

The passage begins with a plea to Jesus from a man who wants his brother to share the family inheritance with him. Presumably the plea came from the younger brother, the brother who was in the weaker position. The Jewish law stated that an older brother would receive two-thirds of an estate while the younger would receive one-third.² It is quite possible here that the older brother

² Deuteronomy 21:16-17

was denying his younger brother his rightful third. Jesus is not interested in family disputes. Remember the flare up between the two sisters we read a few weeks ago? Martha was not happy that her sister was sitting by Jesus' feet while she laboured in the kitchen, looking after their guest. Jesus dismissed her protest. He was not interested in family disputes. He told Martha that she was distracted by many things. Here the disgruntled brother and the rich man depicted in the parable are distracted also, this time with one thing, the lure of additional wealth. The parable is

fascinating. The landowner enjoyed a bumper harvest and he made the decision to make adequate storage provision for all his crops. He decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. What's the problem with that? After all, we have the notable example of Joseph and his advice to Pharaoh in the book of Genesis.³ Store up your crops during the seven good years so that you will have enough when the seven years of famine follow. That's good advice and surely therefore the rich landowner cannot be criticised for being careful and prudent.

³ Genesis 41:33-36

However it was not the rich man's actions that were being criticised instead it was his motivation that condemned him. In Isaiah 22:13 we read the revellers' cry; "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!"⁴ What does the rich man say in the parable? "Relax, eat, drink, be merry."⁵ And what does Jesus say? Tonight you will die! There will not be any tomorrow for you. The rich man was only concerned with "I", "me" and "my". These were the words that dominated his speech. God had richly blessed him. The

⁴ NRSV

⁵ *ibid.*

abundant harvest of crops had not appeared out of nowhere. “We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God’s almighty hand... All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.”⁶ There was no hint of recognition of God’s bounty or thanksgiving offered to God for it. The blessing of rich provision need not have led to a dilemma over barns but instead to a prayer of thanks. Furthermore the hoarding actions of the rich man for his own personal

⁶ Mission Praise 732

gain and security, whilst increasing his own wealth, condemned the poor to yet greater poverty. You see, by storing up the crops he would be able to sell them on at inflated prices during times of hardship. Here was an opportunity to make a profit at the expense of his neighbours. Hence the condemnation of Jesus.

So to the punchline: thus it will be “with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God”.⁷ What does it mean to be rich toward God? Sometimes

⁷ Luke 12:21 NRSV

this parable has been reduced to something like, 'you can't take your wealth with you, so be a generous giver and especially remember the church!' But the punchline doesn't include any mention of the church and surely the meaning of the phrase 'rich toward God' cannot be reduced to such a meaning. We can only find a meaning to this phrase by taking a look back at what Jesus had been talking about. He had been telling the story of the Good Samaritan, the story of Mary and Martha and the teaching about prayer. It makes sense that in these accounts we will find an answer to the

meaning of the phrase 'rich toward God'. The Good Samaritan was rich toward God in using his material resources for the rescue of the man left for dead. Mary was rich toward God in attentive listening to Jesus. Those who put into practice the teaching of the Lord's Prayer are rich toward God in trusting God for daily provision in food, forgiveness and deliverance. Being rich toward God means being people of the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of this world. Storing up worldly goods and security means being people of this world, not the kingdom of God. All of this is a particular challenge to all of

us because we are rich like the rich man in the parable. This little prayer from the writings of Paul Brand, reflecting on a different parable with a similar theme, should challenge us.

“Dear Lord,

I have been re-reading the record of the Rich Young Ruler and his obviously wrong choice. But it has set me thinking. No matter how much wealth he had, he could not ride in a car, have any surgery, turn on a light, buy penicillin, hear a pipe organ, watch TV, wash dishes in running water, type a letter, mow a

lawn, fly in an airplane, sleep on an
innerspring mattress, or talk on the phone,
If he was rich, then what am I?”⁸

Remember a blessing is not a dilemma.
God’s grace should not place us in a
quandary. Instead it should lead us to
thankful recognition of his goodness and a
commitment to being rich towards him.

⁸ Yancey, P. & Brand, P. 1987 *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*
Zondervan p.61