

## The rich fool

I have a lot of Lego. I've been accumulating it since my fourth birthday, and I now have more than 350,000 pieces. That's an awful lot of Lego. Probably more than anyone else you know.

I've recently updated my Lego wish list. It's a list of sets that I would like, and people have in the past used it as inspiration for gift giving occasions – Birthdays, Christmas and so on.

Of, course, I don't need any of those sets in any meaningful way. I can build pretty much anything I like. But I updated my wish list, because, after all there's a lot more Lego it would be nice to have.

But I'm hardly the only person who has a lot of stuff they don't need and to some degree wants more of the stuff they don't need.

When I was at Cherrybrook church we had a fabric and wool destash. It was a day in which people could come along, hire a table and sell the surplus craft materials that they'd accumulated over the years, and the Cherrybrook Uniting craft group sold lots of their surplus fabric and wool. It was a great success: there was a constant stream of people going into the hall, and buying stuff. And lots of stuff. Stuff that they *needed* to complete projects. Stuff that they wanted. And even stuff that they didn't even know they wanted until they saw it.

There is a human desire to accumulate things. Far beyond what we need. But it's good stuff. And we can use it for good purposes – we can make gifts for others from our fabric and wool. We can make clothing and blankets for people living in poverty. We can make toys for children in need.

Now I might not clothe people in Lego bricks, but I can certainly entertain and engage people. We play with Lego regularly in play groups, in my brief stint teaching scripture, using Lego was the only approach that got the attention of all the year five students, and I've provided entertaining displays for church model train and Lego shows, and talking to people at those shows is a springboard for sharing the good news of Jesus.

The things that we desire to accumulate can be good. But we also need to be aware that they may not be. Because our desire for things can be overwhelming. You might not think a Lego wish list is a bad thing, but it could

easily become a bad thing, if my desire for those things pushed other things aside.

I'm sure you'll have heard the saying "He who dies with the most toys wins". And in my experience it is more often 'he' rather than 'she', but certainly not exclusively.

We want stuff. We want more stuff than others. It is greed. And the thing that people are more greedy for than anything else is money. We want money. We want to use it for ourselves. We want it to work for us. We want to hang on to it.

Once upon a time, ads on TV used to encourage us to save... but now they tell us to 'build wealth'. Because the theme seems to be that it's not good enough to have some money, but we want to be wealthy.

St Paul wrote to Timothy: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Paul's phrase "the love of money" (1 Tim) is in fact one Greek word – philarguros – which literally translates as "lover of silver" but which we could fairly translate as avarice or greed.

And when we read that statement from Paul, if we focus on the word "money," we can miss the point what he's saying, because I think the more important part of that phrase is "the love of". The money's not the problem, it's the love of it that is. And you just know it's not a good sort of love that Paul's talking about here – it's love not in terms of God's grace, but it's love in terms of lust and desire. It's the deadly sins of avarice, greed, covetousness and maybe gluttony too.

It's a demand for the things of this world that can never be satisfied. But gosh, aren't we all going to make an effort to do so.

Which brings us to today's reading from Luke, and if you've been going to church for a while, you'll have heard the parable of the rich fool more than a few times, and you'll know, more-or-less, what it means for us.

But so often, the circumstances in which Jesus tells parables can give us an even greater understanding of them, and today's story is prompted by a man from the crowd which has been surrounding Jesus: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

Apparently, the man's older brother refused to give him what he felt he was due. The laws of inheritance in that day stipulated that the elder brother would

receive a double portion of the legacy, (Deut 21:17) then the balance distributed. For whatever reason, this fellow was feeling cheated, and he wanted Jesus to sort it out for him, Jesus was a figure of moral authority, so this man assumed that Jesus would be reasonable arbitrator, and hoped that Jesus would treat him fairly – or perhaps even generously.

Often inheritances are a cause of conflict in families. One child favoured over another. Issues of who did the most work in looking after the deceased, who gets what of the family fortune. But often, it seems, it's not about fairness, but about greed. People sometimes leave fortunes to charities in their wills, and quite often it ends up in court with families challenging the charity's claim.

And so, this man, who wants his share of the family inheritance demands Jesus sort it out for him.

Jesus says to him “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” - “why would I do that?”.

#If you read the verses before today's reading, you see Jesus teaching the crowds – beware the hypocrisy of the Pharisees... there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known... do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But... Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell... don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows... , whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God.” And so on. It is amazing, profound stuff.

I can imagine the crowd staring open-mouthed at him, awestruck by what Jesus was saying.

And then, in what is reminiscent of a scene from Monty Python, a lone voice cries out “tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Jesus doesn't fix his problem, but instead he uses the man's self-centred demand to bridge to more profound teaching.

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12:15)

Think about that “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Not an easy lesson to learn in our world.

Jesus says elsewhere that he is the way, the truth and the life. Our life – our eternal life – comes from Jesus. And as Christians, we have that life, because Jesus gave up his life for us.

Remember the movie, Wall Street – Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas proclaimed “Greed is good?”

In fact, he didn’t just say greed was good, but he tells us why he thought it was: “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, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind, and greed, you mark my words, will not only save [a company], but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA.”

We often talk about God’s ways not being the world’s way, but we don’t often spell out what the differences are. But here we have the difference shown clearly. On one hand we have Jesus saying “Life doesn’t consist in the abundance of possessions” and on the other, Gordon Gekko saying “greed is good”.

Much of our world, of course, follows the “greed is good mantra”, and so does much of our society. But which do we, as a church, follow? Which do we, as individuals follow?

Let it me emphasise again that it’s not the possessions themselves that are the problem, but our attitude to them. Money is not bad. Lego is not bad. Wool and fabric are not bad. But, Jesus is saying, our life doesn’t consist in the abundance of those things.

And then he tells a parable to explain: He begins to talk about this rich man...a farmer who has done very well for himself. As far as we know, he’s a good guy. This is no slumlord or drug dealer or someone who exploits his workers. His is lawful profit. Presumably an honest man, a hard worker and probably an upstanding citizen, too. Through some combination of skill and luck and plain hard work, his investment has paid off. He has got this massive crop in.

Now he has a surplus and storage problem. No place to put all his grain. Jesus lets us hear the man’s thoughts. The farmer debates with himself. “What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.” Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain

and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." (## Eccles 8:15##)

Listen to what he says: "MY crops...MY barns...MY grain...MY goods." "I...I...I..." He sounds like a first-century Gordon Gekko. A totally self-absorbed man preoccupied with accumulating wealth. His only thought is for himself. He resolves to hoard it all for himself and "take life easy, eat, drink, be merry." You have to wonder if he was planning to invite anyone else to the party.

But we know how the story ends. In the words of the text, "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'"

We often think the first century world was very different to the twenty-first century world. And sure, some things were different, but people were the same then as they are now. They had same needs, they had same desires, they had same ambitions. And they had the same flaws, too.

Everywhere Jesus went he saw people he would have seen people like the farmer in the parable – people who were greedy and selfish, people who had forgotten that the world is, ultimately, God's. People who did not realize that all of us owe our lives and our fortunes – great or small – to God, and therefore should live sensitively, caringly, and generously with others.

The farmer in Jesus' parable was most fortunate – we could even say that he was blessed. His lands have produced abundantly to the point that all his barns are full. "What should he do?" he asks himself. The only logical answer that he can come up with is to tear down his barns and build larger ones. That way he can take early retirement and live the good life.

But what the farmer does not consider, is that God has a claim in all of his good fortune. Not just on the harvest, but on the farmer's own life... that very night. Then to whom would the farm and the crops and the massive barns belong? That's the way it is, Jesus says, with those who live only for themselves. Life ends, if not soon, eventually. Where will they be then?

The point of Jesus' parable seems simple and straightforward enough. Do not let greed take you over. Easy enough, right? Except it's not.

The farmer didn't set out to be greedy. He set up, presumably, to be a farmer. To work the land. To harvest crops. To make a living.

And things went well for him. Very well. And he got more than he expected. And he decided to hang on to it.

It's easy to be greedy. Accumulating money feels good. Accumulating other stuff too, be it Lego or fabric or investment properties or whatever, feels good too. And if we have a bit, it whets our appetite for a bit more.

What do you think the farmer should have done? Jesus leaves what he should have done – an exercise for his listeners...and for us.

God calls this man a fool! Which is really strong language from God.

This man is a fool because he gives no mind to God, has literally no thought of God. He was a fool to never consider that God is the giver of all good things, and he had no desire to repay God for his bounty by sharing it with others. This fool builds bigger barns for crops that will decay and come to nothingness.

Jesus tells us the point of this parable before he even begins it. Sometimes it can be hard to discern what God wants us to do, but not here.

What the farmer should have done is left unsaid, but the point of the story is simple: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

We are all wealthy people in world and historical terms. Our circumstances will all be different, but we do all have an abundance of possessions.

So our challenge isn't to dispose of them or disregard them, but to make sure our lives don't consist of them, and make sure our lives aren't centred on them. We need to recognise God's blessings – in whatever form they may take – and thank God for what we have. And we need to seek God's guidance on how we can best use them.

And pray that we will remember that our life isn't in our possessions or our wealth or in any of the other things of the world, but that our life is in Christ who lived for us, who died for us, and gives life to us all.

Amen.