

Among the famous ten commandments of the Old Testament there is the commandment not to covet. To desire the possessions of others is a sin driven by the passion of envy. The parable we have just heard, that of *The Rich Fool*, finds its context where Our Lord is teaching about covetousness, which is being jealous of what others possess. He has just been asked by someone to arbitrate, to decide between a man and his brother in a dispute over an inheritance. Yes, families were the same then as now. Our Lord refuses to become involved:

*‘And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”* (Lk.12;15)

Around 8,000BC people on this planet began moving from living in simple hunter-gather communities to practicing agriculture - the first great change in the human way of life. And agriculture eventually led to surpluses of food: having more than you need. This in turn leads on to what we call civilization but that is another and very long story. Now, of course, most of us have returned to being hunter-gatherers, only our hunting is done along the aisles of supermarkets rather than in jungles or prairie lands. It is said that if the supermarkets were closed for three days there would be panic in the streets of our great cities.

But the man in the parable - he is called a fool - has such a surplus that his future must be assured. He is so successful he has no need to work and toil; he can live a life of leisure. Who, therefore, in this world, or rather, *of this world*, would call him a fool? But that night he dies! What an irony, we might think; his time was up, something of which he was totally unaware. And this death, remember, is no direct punishment for thinking of, or imagining a life of ease, the good life, enjoying the finer things of life, as they say. He dies because his time is up. But he is rich: the trouble is he has no use for those riches any more, he can’t use them now.

Are the Bible commentators too harsh on this man, perhaps? After all, others in the scriptures made provision against the future and amassed wealth and fortune. What, for example, about the patriarch, Joseph, the dreamer? You will recall his story in the book of Genesis. Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, had been sold into bondage in Egypt. The wife of his owner, Potiphar, became attracted to young Joseph and when he refused her advances she falsely accused him of assaulting her. You see! Even in Bronze Age Egypt, in the second millennium BC, they had sexual harassment but here the woman is at fault, by the way. So Joseph ends up in prison but when his dream-predictions come true he brought the attention of the Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt.

Predicting, correctly, seven years of abundance and seven of famine, Joseph organizes the storing up of the Egyptian good harvests and saves the land from disaster. All this is under the providence of God, of course, for it brings the patriarch Jacob and the rest of the family from Canaan into Egypt to save their lives too. So what is the difference between Joseph and *his* storing of grain and the rich fool, pulling down his barns to build bigger ones to store *his* harvest?

Well actually, there is very little difference - unless, that is, you consider that Joseph is thinking of other people: he is saving Pharaoh's people from starvation and, unknown to him at the time, he will be saving his own lost family. Joseph is providing for the necessities of life, he is not thinking of how he can achieve a life of leisure and luxury. Yes indeed, he is rewarded by pharaoh; his virtues bring him to a place of honour in the kingdom, as happens in any good story: the just receive what they deserve in the end.

As for the rich fool, the life of ease that he had in his mind's eye, is taken from him. Why, was it such a wicked thought? Millions around the planet have exactly the same thing in mind, after all. No! The problem is really found elsewhere in this parable, that is, his very common ambition is a distraction. The rich fool has become distracted. Keeping his eye firmly on *this* world, he has lost sight of that which is to come. The point of the parable is summed up in Our Lord's word at the end:

*“...So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”*

Do we hear that? *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear,”* Christ says at the very end. We can take something from this in respect of our prayers. It is easy for us to become distracted, to lose sight of what Jesus described to the over-busy Martha as, *the better part*, as chosen by her sister, the listening and attentive Mary. It is absolutely fine to pray for our needs, those things we require for life. Nowhere in the Lord’s Prayer are we directed to pray for superabundance in this life; only our daily bread, forgiveness and deliverance from the wiles of the devil.

As St Paul tells us in his first letter to Timothy: *“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”* (1 Tim 6:6-10)

We do indeed need work that pays and a house; clothing and heating, lighting, food and drink and good health. All those we can bring before God in our prayers but not a heated indoor swimming pool, a private jet and enough overseas investment that we need work no longer! Do we have ears to hear what I have just quoted from St Paul: *“Now godliness with contentment is great gain.”*

This is precisely what the rich fool lacks, this is his poverty. No thought of sharing this good fortune. He does not so much as praise God for this blessing. For in the mind of the kingdom of God, according to the way they evaluate things there, where everything is upside and down and inside out, compared with this world, this so-called rich fool is a pauper indeed before the judgement seat of God.

Therefore, in this way of thinking, who is the richest person in the bible? Was it Abraham with his sheep and goats and slaves? No.

Was it Job with his fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys? No. Was it Solomon in all his glory? No. In the eyes of God the richest was Our Lady, the Theotokos, for she was not only rich in grace but *filled* with grace.

Our hope, our longing, our prayer, our destiny must be the same. The resurrection life in the fullness of the kingdom, that life known to the saints, if it is nothing else is contentment, free of needs, undisturbed by the passions that plague us now and lead us to sin.

Let us not be distracted by vain ambitions and temporal dreams. In the Church of God we have the source of all the riches we need: God the Holy Spirit. We have the way to that source through repentance, prayer and good works of kindness. And we possess the means of that grace through the holy mysteries of the Orthodox faith in confession, anointing and communion. And furthermore, we have no need to pull down our barn and build a bigger, for the Orthodox Church is wide enough to receive all who come to her in humility and penitence and faith. Truly, we are those who are already in possession of the pearl of great price; we have no need to search elsewhere.