

Luke 12:32-40 — wealth, waiting and watchfulness.

A pedestrian on 57th Street sees a musician getting out of a cab and asks, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Without pause, the artist replies wearily, “Practice, practice, practice.”

Last week we talked about the rich landowner who tears down his barns to build bigger ones, but hasn’t reckoned on death. Between that passage and today’s reading is Jesus’s encouragement not to worry about what you shall eat or drink or wear, concluding that if you seek the kingdom, these things will be given to you as well. And so Jesus concludes that little section with the words that began our reading — by exhorting us to build treasure in heaven that cannot be stolen or become moth-eaten, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be, also.

I think the question I have for that short section, verses 32 to 34, is ‘how much of our possessions should we sell?’ When Jesus says to give up our possessions and give them to the poor, does he really mean it? How literal must we be?

At various points in history people have taken this more or less literally. The majority of religious orders have focused on poverty, chastity and obedience, whether that be as mendicant friars or as monastics. Monastics still had a roof over their heads, food to eat, a bed to sleep on. But not much besides — the point was that living communally, with everything held in common, and your treasure being in heaven, there was little need for luxury, and meanwhile excess wealth helped them to offer hospitality to travellers and the hungry, medicine to the sick, and learning. This pattern did an extraordinary amount to spread and embed Christianity across Europe through the middle ages.

Jesus himself is never overburdened by possessions — but Peter has a house in Capernaum, and it appears Jesus may have too, because in the story about people bashing in the house roof to let down a paralysed man Jesus forgives their sins generally, besides forgiving their bashing in the roof. The only way that makes sense is if Jesus was also the owner of the house.

As usual there is no definitive list of what is the appropriate amount to possess or not. But there is guidance on the right *attitude* to possession. God’s love is more important than what you own. Everything is God’s gift to us, not ours to withhold for ourselves.

Back in the 1990s the curate at my church in Guildford had given up an extremely good job in the city to go into ordination training. When he announced his resignation to his boss, he assumed he was losing Steve to another company, and offered him more. It wasn’t about the money — Steve (and so many more ministers) went from roast beef to beans on toast, but also a much more fulfilling vocation. So the guidance is simply that what you do with your money will consistently tell God, and everyone else, where your heart lies.

The next section, on watchfulness and waiting may sound like a change of subject, but it links back to the rich fool who had no expectations of anything more than a life of self-serving luxury. Here, Jesus warns us literally to gird our loins for service, with our lamps lit. It will be good for those servants when the master comes and finds them ready.

Don’t put off faith for later because you’re too busy: know God now, love Jesus now, follow him now. We are probably familiar with St Augustine’s line, ‘Lord, give me chastity and continence, but not yet.’ Jesus urges us instead to be ready now.

How alert is alert? How ready is ready? Matthew’s gospel has the similar image of the ten virgins awaiting the bridegroom. Some have their lamps or their torches ready, some have run out of oil — oops! — and are then not admitted — a starker image of being found wanting when the bridegroom returns. Again, it’s tempting to ask these sorts of questions, but not helpful to answer them. How Christian should you be? Well, how much do actually seek God’s rule on earth as it is in heaven?

I began by citing the well-worn joke about getting to Carnegie Hall. Practice. If your heart is really focused on getting to Carnegie Hall you will have an inner drive to keep practicing each day. If you really love Jesus you won't be able to stop yourself 'practicing' — you will pray, and listen and change and become more Christlike. I'm not saying it won't be hard work, but you won't be fighting against yourself either.

Now in the final part of this passage Jesus says that if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. The surprise here is that the 'owner' in this image is the devil, and that the thief is Jesus! The devil really thinks he owns this world, while God's kingdom is the other place. But we know God's kingdom is here and is coming more fully. God's kingdom is 'breaking in' moment by moment in love and grace and miracles. Those who believe that they have 'seen off' Christianity will be surprised, and are being surprised.

I want to circle around to conclude where we began: do not worry. The rich fool of last week was overly focused on wealth. Jesus has warned too that we are not to be anxious about the essentials of life because God knows our needs — instead focus on God's kingdom. And as for this alertness for Christ's coming — this is not a state of anxious alert, but of joyful readiness, which is quite different. God's kingdom comes with love, so fear or anxiety is of no purpose here, but joyful expectation is. We believe in Christ, we long for God's kingdom to come, we anticipate eternity in the Father's love. There are no riches greater than the riches of knowing God. This should then keep all our anxiety (and our avarice) in check.

Amen.