# The Parable of the Rich Fool: Luke 12:13-21

Adelaide Road Presbyterian Church, July 10th 2022.

## Introduction: Your Desolate Neighbour

I am a theologian, but I lead a team of researchers who consider the intersection between the values of the Kingdom of God and the reality of political policy in Ireland. It is based over in the Gardiner Street parish, on the wrong side of the city. We are called Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, in case you want to look us up – [www.jcfj.ie](http://www.jcfj.ie)

We look specifically at questions of environmental care and penal policy, as well as trying to develop what we call social theology. But we are most famous over the years for our work on studying the housing and homelessness crisis. All my colleagues are astonishingly impressive, but the most prominent member of the team is Fr Peter McVerry, the famed advocate for homeless people.

Over the last five years, we have been deeply discouraged. Not too long ago, Peter was attacked publicly in the press by a sitting government minister for “always being a prophet of doom”. Peter had said that homelessness was about to double to 5000 because of the government’s profit-obsessed policies. The minister went on the morning RTE radio show to scoff at this prediction. Peter responded by affirming his prediction, warning that the State was facing a “tsunami of homelessness”.

Peter was proven right. When the JCFJ was established over 40 years ago – when Ireland was very poor – homeless figures weren’t even officially gathered. We estimate there were 400 homeless people in the entire country in the early 1980s. The numbers did indeed fly past 5000. Then they kept growing. We currently have over 10000 people homeless in the state, including more than 3000 children.

The average housing price in this district is €470,000, which means you need a household income of about €120,000 to settle in here – that’s after the €50,000 deposit that you have to accumulate. Houses are cheaper elsewhere of course, but they are also skyrocketing even faster. The latest figures show house prices in Leitrim, Roscommon and Longford – the three cheapest counties in the country have risen more than 13% on average in the last year.

Did your salary rise by 13% in the last year?

For those who cannot afford to purchase a house, there is no better news. The average rent in this district is now just short of €2,200 a month. That’s a 10% price hike in the last year, which is really remarkable because the whole of south Dublin is a rent pressure zone, where price hikes above 2% a year are technically illegal.

For those priced out of that market – and a financial advisor would say that includes everyone who earns less than €6,600 a month – there are even fewer options. The State closes the gap with direct subsidies from our collective reserves that goes directly to landlords and vulture funds. We currently spend just short of €3 million *a day* on these supports and we get no lasting asset in exchange.

One of the founding hopes of the Irish State after independence was that we would be able to house people well. Even in the darkest days, the Irish government used to honour this commitment. It was not unusual to see the State build 7000 houses annually back in the 1970s. Last year, in the midst of this long-running housing disaster, when Ireland is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, the local authorities of Dublin directly built just 175 homes for social rent. If you are upset by that, remember Dubliners aren’t the worst hit. Some counties completed absolutely nothing.

This very brief, very depressing, snapshot of the situation we are facing may be news to very few of you. You may be stuck longing for a home. You may have adult children living with you as a way to save. You may have grandchildren living abroad because their parents realised they’d never be able to secure stable housing at home. It used to be that we thought of homelessness in terms of addiction and chaotic lives. This is no longer true. The majority of homeless adults in Ireland today are working. Statistically, there are people here in the room who are in that situation, or at serious risk of it. The reason people are homeless is that they can’t earn enough money to have a roof over their head.

## Attending to the Text

Now some of you may be asking why I am giving you a crash course in housing statistics. It is because it is the most direct way for me to communicate how precisely relevant this passage is to our current situation.

Jesus is asked to adjudicate between warring brothers about an inheritance – Irish culture is familiar with this tragic scenario. It’s almost a cliché that families are torn apart by disputes about the farm, about land, about housing.

“Tell my brother,” commands the voice from the crowd, imagining that when he encountered the Son of God it would be he who got to call the orders. Jesus has little time for these presumptions, as we see in verse 14. “Who appointed me to be judge on this issue?” He is the judge of course, the ultimate judge who will rule decisively on that final day. To try to show the man how he is stuck in a dead end, he responds with a parable.

There are four plot points in the parable:

* The great yield received in verse 16;
* The problem of where to store all the crops in verse 17;
* The *apparently wise* solution that the farmer comes up with in verse 18 and 19;
* And the divine interruption which reveals how the entire project is foolish (verse 20).

There are some important details that you notice if you attend to the text carefully. The first thing to note is that the field produces the great crop, not the man. This is an economic tale but it is not one that believes in the modern myth of the “wealth creator”. For Jesus, it seems, wealth flows primarily from God’s good creation and the challenge that faces us is how are we to receive this bounty – is it an opportunity to experiment with radical generosity or will we be seduced by the foolish hoarding instinct.

The second thing to note is that the farmer is entirely alienated in this story. When faced with the pleasant problem of the great harvest, he does not consult with his wife and his family. He does not draw in the counsel of his friends, or seek out experts, or deliberate with his staff. The text is clear that he “thinks to himself” about “what shall *I* do?” When he looks forward to that distant horizon when he can rest from his toil and labour, he again imagines himself in solitude. He does aim to take life easy but he is still on his own.

The farmer looks like a wise steward to us because he is entirely self-interested. He looks after himself. He is self-sufficient. He need rely on no charity. He has grand plans to maximise his resources. He would be praised by modern Irish society.

And he is declared a fool by God.

Now he is not a fool because he aims to eat, drink, and be merry. Jesus repeatedly is depicted engaged in just this activity and he describes the coming of the Kingdom as a feast. He is a fool because he let his life get curved into himself so that instead of receiving his wealth as an exciting gift with which to build community, he sought to provide only for his own appetites.

You can be as wise as you like in your financial stewardship, but if you trust in wealth, you are trusting in something that will fail you. You are like someone who is convinced they are making progress because the train they are on is rapid. But if it is going in the wrong direction, you are just getting further and further from your destination.

## Returning to the Introduction

The farmer is even more of a fool when we think about Jesus’ economic context. In 1st century Mediterranean agriculture, everyone was a few bad harvests away from bankruptcy and then you could be sold into slavery. The farmer did nothing wrong in the eyes of the State when he received the bounty of the fields as an opportunity for self-enlargement. But he ignored the moral law entirely. God’s gifts to us are meant to be shared. When we encounter his abundant provision, that is a sign that we should be generous to those around us, to help those in immediate need and to build a society where the weak are not trampled over by the strong. That’s what it means to believe in God and his Kingdom. To be called a fool is not just a random insult – it is a technical description in the bible of someone who, regardless of what they say with their mouths, declares with their hearts that they do not believe in God.

The farmer’s barn upgrade and greed for more and more wealth is not just a refusal to help those around him who didn’t have as big a harvest. By storing up more for later, while leaving his current fields intact, he has established the basis to increase his own productivity and when his neighbours fall on hard time, he will be the one they come to for loans. Indebted to him, they may then be forced to sell him their land at discount prices if they fall on hard times 2 or 3 years in a row.

This is not just interesting historical information about how economics functioned in the Roman Empire, it is the bridge to our current day. The housing crisis we are enduring can be understood in many different ways. But one of the most compelling narratives is that the system as it is currently set up is designed to make the strong stronger at the expense of the weak. The farmer who pursued his own wealth at the expense of his needy neighbour is a fool. How much more foolish are we who support an economic system that allows those who already have property to leverage their wealth to procure more and more, immiserating younger and poorer neighbours and driving thousands of people into homelessness.

When generic social conservatives are asked about the moral decline of society, they make vague noises, mostly about questions of sexual norms. But the biblically inspired mind looks at our current society and holds it in judgement with specific precision: the name for any economy that priorities self interest over the common good is foolish, which is to say, it thinks there is no God to hold it in judgement.

Verse 20: 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?’

## Conclusion: The Foolishness of God is True Wisdom

What is the meaning of life?

Whatever way we cut it, our society insists that the good life is achieved through an abundance of possessions. The Gospel is counter-cultural because it insists that while *basic* possessions are significant, the good life is achieved through loving God and loving others.

In our society today, there is a housing disaster. Perhaps it is an opportunity for us to witness to our foolish wisdom – our insistence that the Kingdom of God is more real than any petty kingdom established by men. Might there be some way that we can use the abundance that God blesses us with to help secure for others the basic possession of a safe place to lay their head?

And more deeply than that, this parable presses on us to ask what it is we trust in? From where do we draw meaning?

You will never be contradicted in our society if you pursue wealth and abundant possessions. Except by God, that is!

Christ enjoyed the riches of heaven and willingly gave that up to come amongst us. The treasure that he offers us was costly beyond measure and has a value that cannot be priced. He gave up his life to offer us the one thing that can be trusted – forgiveness of our sins, redemption through the cross, and reconciliation with God. This is the path to true wisdom.

If you love business and enterprise, you do not need to give them up to follow this path. In fact, they can be charged with a new significance as they carry the potential for something much more meaningful than rampant profit and insular self-interest – your commercial activity can now serve the common good. If you love to eat and drink and be merry, you do not need to give that up to follow this path. In fact, the joy of fellowship and hospitality is the ultimate promise of friendship with God.

But to follow this path you must give up on the faulty wisdom of age. We must see wealth for the foolish hollow promise that is. We must treasure instead the redemption – a financial term that means to save people who are bankrupt – that Jesus offers us from the cross. If we trust in our own treasures, we are lost. When we trust in Him, we shall be found. This morning, commit again to this wonderful foolishness of God, which is true wisdom: that when we make no claim for ourselves besides our need, then we will be welcomed into our true home.

Let us pray...