

“For Generous Providing” a sermon based on Luke 12:13-21 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 31 July 2022.

Parables are a way of getting under our skin, wooing us towards the world God envisages. As Jesus tells the parable we heard today, I wonder what that world looked like for him. And if the farmer in the parable was not what Jesus hoped for, what kind of farmer did he hope for? Instead of a farmer having so much grain that he decided to build bigger barns, what? Instead of speaking only of himself, what? Instead of speaking of **my** crops, what? What would a Jesus farmer look like? Let me tell a story of another kind of farmer.

His first memory of crops involved his parents. They had fruit trees in abundance, bottled fruit in the cupboards, frozen vegetables in the freezer, grapes drooping from vines, onions hung from beams in the shed, jam on kitchen shelves. When visitors came, they nearly always left with something. Friends met in the local town were asked if they would like plums - bring a container, his mother would say. Would you like some string beans, then bring a container, his father said. Would you like potatoes, then bring a bucket. It wasn't a big piece of land, but it was productive, and in the seasons of growth there was a flow of visitors leaving with fruit or vegetables. Family visited from out of town. They knew to bring a container. So the farmer noticed, that although the family was not rich, they gave, and although the farmer thought at times he would have liked a juicy peach or a nice plum or a bunch of grapes, and he did get some, a lot was given away. That's how it was.

But not all the family was like that. There was an uncle who had done well. Good education, international travel, worked in cities around the world, highly regarded professionally. When he retired he bought a local farm, and he built a beautiful home, in which he kept fascinating pieces acquired on his trips. Once the house was built, and the exotic pieces given their place, and the share-milker began managing the farm, the uncle settled into the house, by himself. Few people visited. When they did, they were introduced to an amazing home, and incredible views, and fascinating stories of a past life. From the front window you could see as far as Mount Ruapehu. But it was hard visiting the uncle. He seemed to live in the years when life had been busy, and he had achieved much, when he belonged to this club and knew that person and received that award. And now, thought the farmer, though there were fascinating pieces, the house seemed empty. And the farmer thought to himself, I don't want to end my days like that.

He came across these words from Bruce Prewer - "Our mortality shows what is really ours, what we are really worth; and this worth is not measured in big barns, big power, big popularity, big influence, big status. God's currency is love, love and more love. Love cannot be devalued either in life or death. It is eternal." He read those words and wondered what he would take with him in the hour of death. Did he want to live an empty life with full barns?

Having left home, he had been able to buy land, and as the farm became more productive, a neighbouring property became available. He borrowed more and bought it. He was thinking of those who would come after him. He wanted to provide for them, especially as housing seemed so unaffordable. But then he noticed in his spirit, that as the farm expanded, as he borrowed more, so did the anxiety grow. The regular visit to the bank manager was especially stressful. And he noticed in himself, that his memories of his childhood began to fade. That way of living seemed so long ago, a different world, a bygone era, a golden time, before cellphones and big houses and big everything.

By now he had married. His wife drew him towards the church. He began to hear stories. He was surprised at how often Jesus mentioned money and farms and barns. Every now and then, during the sermon, when he wasn't thinking about when to move the cows or cut the hay or fix the holes in the farm tracks or whether they had left the iron on, it seemed like the message was for him. There were times when the word unsettled him. Not in the sense of being got at, but in the sense of being addressed, spoken to, as if someone knew what was going on inside him, how he was feeling, what he was thinking about. Sometimes the awkwardness surfaced and stayed.

He thought of the people he met at church. There was the young mother raising children on her own, having faced a really difficult situation with courage, and who was finding support, gaining friends, the children appearing confident with those around them, but he imagined that week by week it was touch and go. He admired the way she seemed to do so much with so little, and to carefully manage what must have been a very tight budget. There was the retired professional who had done quite well financially, finding ways to give money away when the opportunity arose. The older couple who invited people into their home when they could, including the young ones in the congregation. Around him were folk who seemed largely uninterested in money and the size of their home or the newness of their car, or some of the stuff the advertisers kept promoting.

But he also sensed how up against it this small group of church people were. They were inundated with advertising that put value on what people possessed. This

product would give their life meaning. That product promised freedom. Another product would win them friends. Role models were promoted who had little to do with love and generosity. And he felt ill at ease, when he heard the regular call to cut taxes and reduce spending. If taxes were cut, he would benefit, but the young mother would get almost nothing. He had begun to notice how influential the most wealthy had become. The values of his youth seemed to have passed. In his youth, he had benefitted greatly from the health service, but he could see now that it was struggling. There were not enough GPs training, so the local practice relied on locums. The local school had provided a marvellous start for him, but now it struggled to attract teachers. Too many were going to Australia.

And the whole economic system seemed built on growing, expanding, getting more, building barns. He was a farmer and he could see what it did to the water and land around him. He used an irrigator and they had come to rely on it, yet at what cost? He tried to do the right thing. As a couple, they were buddies to a young person from Presbyterian Support. They gave to Christian World Service every Christmas. They were on the church's automatic payment system, and when they sold an animal, sometimes they gave more. They did what they could for their parents and their family.

But at the end, the farmer still wondered about the whole system. Was there anything he could do to ensure people had enough? Was there anything he could do to close the gap between the least wealthy and the most wealthy? The political system seemed trapped, the politicians bound to powerful interests ... what could he do? He didn't need to build more barns. He didn't want to build more barns. Over the years, what he gave away in love, in relationship, in compassion, in prayer, in concern for others, would have filled many barns. And when he died, people said how rich he had been in the things that really mattered.

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