

SERMON FOR THANKSGIVING (Cape Town - 6 September 2009)

Text: Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possession". And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought (reasoned) to 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.'" "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?' "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:15-21).

It is only once a year that we celebrate Thanksgiving. It is always a very special Sunday as it leads us to reflect on the many blessings that we enjoy. It is a time of great joy and gratitude. So often when we talk to one another or read the newspapers we experience the exact opposite. We reflect on what *isn't* working out in our lives or in our country. We might complain about the increased traffic and the long time it takes to get to work or home these days. Or we may express our frustration on the high level of crime in our country and the number of job losses that we are experiencing. But today our focus is on our blessings.

The man in our sermon text is a very blessed man. Contrary to most of us at the moment, he experienced an economic boom. In simple language: In a very short period of time he made a "killing" (a lot of money.) There is not indication whatsoever in the parable that he made his money in a dishonest way. There is no bribery. There is no cheating of the books or any other dishonest behaviour.

The man in the parable is a farmer. We just read that one year he produced a "good" crop. We can assume, the good crop was a combination of good farming methods, long hours of hard work, and of course very favorable weather conditions. That is, rain at the right time and also the necessary sun and warmth when needed.

The end result is a huge harvest. And what this man does *after the harvest* is quite exemplary. His actions reflect in many ways the very same values and virtues that I would like to pass onto my own children. You see, he doesn't just spend all of his money immediately - a bigger house, a smarter car, just everything his heart had ever desired. He is prudent. He saves for the future. He knows, life is not always a bed of roses. He is aware of the economic cycle, that invariably good times are followed by difficult times again.

So what does he do? He reasons with himself. He reflects. And he comes up with a plan. He tears down his smaller barns and builds bigger ones.

His actions remind me of what Joseph, the patriarch, did in Egypt. You know the story. Pharaoh had this terrible nightmare of seven fat cows that came out of the Nile river. But then seven lean cows followed shortly afterwards and swallowed the seven fat cows. Pharaoh was perturbed by his dream. He called on his advisers to interpret it. But they couldn't. But then somebody in the palace remembered that Joseph could interpret dreams. He was summoned. And he said to Pharaoh: "The seven fat cows resemble seven years of good growth. But they will be followed by seven lean years when all gains will be lost." And Pharaoh said: "What shall we do?" And Joseph - it seems - gave the exact same advice that this farmer in the parable decided on. He said to Pharaoh: "Build bigger barns, so that the people in your land may have food in the lean years that lie ahead".

But totally mystifying in this parable is that God calls this farmer, with the good crops who intends to build bigger barns to store his harvest, a fool. Why?

There are two reasons for this: The first one is, that in the farmer's reflection on what he should do with his gained wealth, the name of "God" does not feature a single time. In fact, the two stories of this farmer and Joseph are worlds apart. In Joseph's story there is hardly a line where God does not feature. "God" gives Pharaoh a dream. "God" reveals the dream to Joseph. Through Joseph "God" interprets this dream to Pharaoh and provides a plan of action to save his people! But when this man in the parable reflects on his "good crop", God does not form part of his reflection - not even once.

There is not a single word of "thanks" or "gratitude". In fact his deliberation is a monologue, or if you like a dialogue totally to himself. In his short reflection the words "I" and "my" feature not less than six times. He says: ***"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."*** It is all about "me" and "mine". God does not feature. After gaining wealth, his success and possession dethroned God. God is pushed aside. He no longer features in this man's life. There is not a single line about: "God, I worked hard, but you blessed me". "God, you gave me more than I ever deserve". "God, what do you want me to do with this gained wealth?"

Generally we tend to reflect on God in difficult times. We cry out for his help. But success so often makes us independent from God. Suddenly God is no longer needed, nor does he feature in our deliberations. We don't ask him for "his will"

with the wealth “he” has blessed us with.

The second reason why God calls this man a “fool” is, he is “consumed” by his wealth. His wealth - what to do with it and how to keep it - becomes the core and the sole focus of his life. Not a single time, does he look beyond himself. Also in this regard he is the exact opposite of Joseph. Joseph listened to God. He stored the grains in bigger barns because he had discovered “God’s” plan. And as result, Joseph became a blessing to thousands of people, even his own family in Israel.

Not this man, his wealth consumes him. His wealth becomes his personal identity, which so often is the case also in our society. More often than not self-confidence is linked to success and wealth. If I succeed in this life, I feel good about myself. But in times of failure, my self-image gets a knock. Why? Because my identity is directly linked to my possessions and the personal success I record in this life.

This is a far cry from what we read about the apostle Paul. To the Philippians he writes: ***“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. (But) I have learned the secret to be content”*** (4:11-12). What is the secret? Paul found his identity, his self-worth *in God*.

In the introduction to this parable Jesus says: ***“Man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”*** (v.14). Life is more. What determines the value of my life, is not my possessions but my relationship with God. He is rich. Of course, I may *and should* plan for the future. That is prudent. But not my wealth is my security. My security is God, and God alone. When this farmer suddenly died, *he had nothing*. His wealth had served no purpose. And in eternity he stood alone before God - the God he didn't really know. Being blessed he had a God-given opportunity to become a blessing to many, but it never happened. He was self-focused and hoarded his wealth to himself.

How can this danger that God gets dethroned by the abundance of our possessions be circumvented?

In ancient times God provided his people with an ingenious plan. It is called the “first fruit” (see Lev.23:10). When God freed the Israelites from slavery and promised them a land of milk and honey he said this to them: “The first-fruit of everything you harvest, bring it to me.” In others words, if I harvest a field of grain, the first sheaf I take to the temple. Or if a woman baked bread, the first loaf was taken to the temple.

Why? God didn't need it. This first-fruit was simply to serve as a reminder *who the source of my blessing is*. I don't take my "last-fruit" to the temple, if indeed something remains over. I don't give to God of my surplus, of what is left over, at the end of a month. I give him the first-fruit, thereby declaring: "God, I know everything I have and enjoy comes from you."

Today we decorated the altar with some food items. And maybe you brought something along as well. But let me tell you, this is not a decoration, but rather a declaration: "All the food and indeed everything I have, comes from God."

We are going to give these food items away. And we must never believe, that the more we give, the poorer we ourselves will become. The converse is true. Nor should we think that in these difficult economic times we may not have enough to share.

Let me conclude with a short story of Richard Wurmbbrand. He was a Romanian Minister. After World War II when the Russian took over and starting persecuting the church, he went underground. But he was soon caught and imprisoned for 18 years. Three of those years he was in solitary confinement, just seeing his tortures. But the story is told that he and some other Christians decided to tithe even in prison. They received a dirty cup of soup every day and one slice of bread a week. I assume they drank the soup, but these Christians decided that every tenth week they would take that slice of bread and give it to a fellow prisoner weaker than themselves.

This way they acknowledged God even with the very little they had. They didn't become rich in prison. But from what I read, I can deduce that their was contentment in their lives, because they were rich in God. We need to learn to worship the *provider* and to use what he provides to us for "his" purpose. Amen.