

(Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21)

So on hearing that parable of the rich farmer, I wonder how you picture in your mind the word ‘barn’? Is it a Dutch barn: a simple structure – essentially a corrugated iron roof on poles? Or is it a stone barn, like the traditional field barns which are such a distinctive feature of the Yorkshire Dales? For the latter, the idea of ‘pulling down and building bigger’ would definitely not be an easy task (even without first securing planning permission!).

And a farmer’s lot is not an easy one. Only a few days ago, there was talk locally of this year’s abundant hay and silage crops. For some farmers, it was getting to the point that they, too, had ‘no place to store their crops’. Then, the rains came, and in Fremington – between Grinton and Reeth – we saw the image of the Reeth Show field under water and nearby, well-stocked barns also under water. Clearly, in the real world, even when the crops are gathered in they are not necessarily ‘safely’ so.

For the rich farmer in our parable, however, he thought they were: so much so, he allowed himself to think about adding to his sense of security by building bigger barns. This resonates with the shrill cry of the ‘Teacher’ in our first reading today, from Ecclesiastes: ‘All is vanity,’ he says.

We are invited to conclude here that in real life our true security can come only from being ‘rich towards God’. And recent events seem to confirm this: in our individual, family and community lives, we know that God does not spare us from bad things happening – but he does assure us that as we go through them he will never leave our side.

It is worth recalling here that in our Sunday readings we have been working our way through Luke’s gospel. And in the section we are currently studying, we are looking at the teaching of Jesus on what it means to live according to his way; what it means to be ‘rich towards God’. Last week, we looked at prayer; this week the theme is how to deal with opposition – internal as well as external.

And behind all of Jesus’ teaching is his emphasis on the reality that God’s kingdom – his just and gentle rule – is breaking through. He uses examples like the inexorable growth of the mustard seed into a large tree, or the transformative effect of a small amount of yeast on the whole lump of dough. Here we see that ‘opposition’ *can* be overcome – by time and by both drawing from- and ‘holding on- to that which is good’. Crucially, we also see that in ‘God’s economy’ the idea of ‘leverage’ is taken to a level that even our rich farmer could never imagine! In God’s economy, small actions can have a huge effect.

Now, as a former mechanical engineer, I still prefer to pronounce ‘leverage’ as “leeverage”! And I remain fascinated at how pulley systems, or gear trains, or hydraulic cylinders can give a mechanical advantage which enables a small force to

have a big effect. Remove the need for a mechanical link, and in other engineering fields the potential for leverage is even more pronounced.

Imagine, for example, rolling up at 7 o'clock in the morning at the George and Dragon pub in Hudswell, to find a van parked outside with a satellite dish mounted to its roof. Go through the pub to the back terrace, to discover a man with a camera mounted to his shoulder! Sit in the appointed place and encounter another man with a microphone asking you a question! Respond to the question as if you were talking to him in a one-to-one conversation, and then marvel at the electronic engineering which enables that conversation to be beamed instantly by satellite across the whole nation! Then think to yourself afterwards that in spite of all that leverage so little time is allowed to say anything of any substance! 'Vanity,' says the Teacher...

In God's kingdom it is purely by God's grace that our small actions really can have a huge effect. Often, this will not be as instant as a live broadcast; indeed, it may take a lifetime – or more – to see it. And just as often, the effect will not be as directly visible as is the case with any form of media: but it will be clear to those with eyes to see.

God's kingdom is growing, in God's time and in line with God's values. But in our impatience to see progress, we can so often be distracted by quick fixes, by 'vain things', or by obstacles along the way – some of them immensely challenging. So amidst these distractions we must endeavour to 'hold on' to our intention to be rich towards God, and to remain assured that by his grace even the smallest action will make a difference.

As Christians, this should give us grounds for confidence – and remember that part of our Diocesan vision is that we should become confident Christians. We all need to work on building our confidence in the God who will never let us down, whatever may happen to us. We all need, too, to work on building our confidence in proclaiming the reality of his just and gentle rule – even in the face of opposing forces, internal as well as external.

Perhaps we can take heart in all this from Prince Charles, no less. It was the desire of his charity, the Prince's Countryside Fund, to help struggling rural communities to grow in confidence and thereby to flourish. This then led to the launch on Wednesday of the 'Village Survival Guide', a manual filled with advice on how to build a strong community – and Hudswell was seen as a good example of what can be done! Hence the arrival of the BBC not simply to give publicity to The Prince's Village Survival Guide but also to proclaim the reality of Hudswell!

So be confident in the God of love who will never let us down. Be rich towards him, and in his economy you will feel secure as a valued member of his kingdom. An integral part of that security is that you will be enabled to help others to enjoy the same sense of liberation: liberation from all that distracts us from holding on to that which is good.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’

Thanks be to God. Amen.