

HUNGER FOR CHANGE

Environment for Life



Biblical Reflections

Most of us would probably agree that the right to food is a fundamental human right. This year's The Sharing Way Annual Project raises awareness of the millions of people who face the threat of hunger due to poverty, global climate change and the way the world's economy functions to serve the interests of some people at the cost of others. The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) compels us to consider that the disparity between wealth and poverty is not unique to our time, and reflect on God's call to faithful discipleship in a world of hunger.

It can be assumed that Jesus used the parable numerous times in the villages of Galilee and Judea. The original audiences would have understood the social background to the story. Most people in rural areas were poor. Their properties were small. The tax collectors of Herod Antipas in Galilee and the Roman procurator in Judea forcibly took about 30 percent of their production as a tax. The temple elite in Jerusalem had their own tax collectors who were on hand at harvest time to demand the tithe. (We need to remember that in the first century the high priesthood was a political appointment made by Rome). At the best of times it was difficult to feed a family and retain seeds for the coming year. Farmers went into debt at their peril. The failure to make payments could lead to the seizure of family lands.

The audiences that gathered around Jesus were made up of people who were food insecure. They would have understood instinctively that the man in the parable was rich because he had taken possession of the lands of peasants who had fallen into debt. His wealth was contaminated by what we refer to as structural violence. In the parable his land produces a great crop. He faces a "problem" of how to take advantage of this situation to increase his wealth. Because he is isolated from the community around him, he dialogues with himself rather than his neighbours. His self advice is to tear down his current storage facilities and build larger barns. This will have the effect of driving up local prices as the peasants around him run out of their own grain. He speaks to himself about the years of comfort and enjoyment that lie in front of him. In his self discourse there is no acknowledgment of the needs of others around him.

This is the only gospel parable in which God speaks. He calls the man a fool. He has lived the life of a practical atheist who denies that there is a God (see Psalm 14:1). Death will come to him much sooner than he anticipated.

The conclusion of the parable compares those who store up wealth for themselves with others who are rich towards God. We may wish to take time to unpack what it means to be rich towards God or to have treasure in heaven. We can be confident that the relationship that Jesus describes includes sharing God's concern for the most vulnerable people who live around us and acting on their behalf. It means to reflect God's character and values in the way we relate to others and use our resources.

Farmers in Brownfield, Alberta grow a wheat crop each year for The Sharing Way's fund with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. In 2007 they faced an imminent snow storm that would damage the wheat and lead to lower prices. They left their own crops to suffer the storm and hurried to harvest "the Lord's crop." I can think of no better example of being rich towards God.