

**SERMON PEACHED AT STMATTHEW'S KENSINGTON ON SUNDAY AUGUST 31 2022 BY  
THE REV'D STUART LANGSHAW (LOCUM WHILE TIM HARRIS IS AT LAMBETH)  
CONFERENCE**

**DATE: Sunday July 31 and Wednesday August 3**

**CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington**

**SERMON SERIES: The Lectionary**

**BIBLE PASSAGE: Luke 12:13:21**

**SERMON TOPIC: Covetousness**

Have a look at the first slide or two of our reading from Luke. If you were asked to deliver a message about this passage, what would you say? ...

*“One of the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?’ And he continued, ‘Be careful, and beware of all covetousness; for our life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions.’ And Jesus told them a parable, and said, ‘The land of a rich man brought forth plenteously ...’”*

Have you ever been asked a question that is well beyond your competence to answer? Maybe the question's subject matter impinged just a bit on your area of knowledge, but you knew that it would be wrong to venture an answer. The very opening verse of today's Gospel reading is such an instance in the life of Jesus. “Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.” Why would anyone ask **Jesus** such a question? Was he a lawyer? No. He had never gone to college and been awarded a Bachelor's degree in “Rabbi studies.” But Jesus was regarded by people as a rabbi. And rabbis were knowledgeable chaps whose opinions were regarded and respected. So this incident plays a spotlight on how Jesus was regarded by the general Jewish population.

But here's another thought to ponder. 3 chapters later, in Luke chapter 15, Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son who demanded his share of his father's inheritance. I wonder if the inheritance question addressed to Jesus in chapter 12 formed a part of the background to Jesus' parable. Hmmmm. Good thing to ponder.

But the inheritance question certainly prompted Jesus to give a little dissertation about covetousness that included the story of the rich fool. 5 chapters later, in Luke 18, Jesus was confronted by the **rich young ruler** who was unable to let go control of his wealth, and follow Christ. It seems that there were people in the upper financial echelons of Jewish society who brought their questions and concerns to Jesus.

The 10<sup>th</sup> of the 10 commandments was a commandment about covetousness. “You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife; or his manservant or his maidservant, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is his.”

“Covetousness” is not a word that most of us have used in casual conversation recently. It has dropped out of day-to-day English and has been replaced by such words as avarice, grasping and greed. But we know that covetousness has two meanings. The first is an **inordinate desire to possess** an object that someone else possesses. Covetousness is jealousy ++, jealousy over the top, jealousy out of control. The second meaning of covetousness is **inordinate acquisitiveness** – the desire to have more and more and more ... mostly wealth. But there is a healthy aspect to jealousy too.

Shakespeare had a few references to jealousy in the 2 plays we mentioned last week in the introduction to the sermon. In *Othello*, Iago says to Othello, “O my lord, beware of jealousy. It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.” (*Othello*, Act 3 Scene 3). And in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia refers to “green-eyed jealousy.” “How all the other passions flee to air, as doubtful thoughts and rash-embraced despair, and shuddering fear, and green-eyed jealousy.” (*Merchant of Venice*, Act 3 Scene 2). Clearly, in Shakespeare's time, people with green eyes were regarded with suspicion.

Is covetousness a problem for us today? Is it a spiritual problem for God's people today? I think it is less of a problem now than it was in Jesus' day. Nonetheless, we see instances of jealousy that make us stop and think.

It is possible to appreciate a thing of beauty, and not be jealous of the person who owns it and uses it. We all appreciate new cars, especially when ours has old-age hiccups and makes strange noises and groanings where it never used to, and duco that has had its day. When we see the latest model sedan, SUV or sports car, it is perfectly possible to salivate quietly and appreciate its slick, neat lines, and gleaming duco and say – "That's a beautiful car." That's *appreciation*. When we go a step further and say, "I wish I had a car like that," that's *jealousy*. When we go even further and say, "It's unfair that he can have such a car and I can't," that's *covetousness*. And when we take another step and say, "If I can't have a vehicle like that then he/she can't," and run a key down the duco, that's criminal damage *fed by* the covetousness that is jealousy++.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the older brother coveted his father's love, and he was jealous of the attention and fuss his younger brother received. The older brother was due to receive everything his father had in his share of his father's will. But he had an inordinate desire for his father's attention and an inordinate dislike of his wasteling, spendthrift younger brother. That's covetousness that affected relationships. That's what covetousness does.

There is a healthy aspect to jealousy, however. It happens when jealousy acts as a spur to us to do what has to be done to have our own article that the other person has, instead of leading to criminal damage. Jealousy over a car can stimulate us to develop a budget, save our pennies, and curb our spending on flippant things, so that we can afford to purchase a car like that. Jealousy can spur us on to make the effort and put in the hard work to be as good as someone whose efforts and hard work have paid off so handsomely for them.

The second meaning of covetousness is inordinate acquisitiveness – the desire to have more and more and more ... mostly wealth. And that was the point of Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool in our gospel reading this morning. Crops, more crops and even more crops. Barns, bigger barns and even bigger barns. "I'm set up for the rest of my life," said the rich fool – and in Jesus' parable the rest of his life lasted just a few hours. Where had his acquisition of grain and barns got him in the end? Jesus said, "So is the person who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God." (Luke 12:21).

There is an antidote to covetousness and jealousy of course. It's called thankfulness. It's called counting our blessings. There are many people who do things really tough these days – flood victims, COVID sufferers, people working inordinate hours and at a great strain level, people with chronic health issues. It's rather presumptuous or even patronising for someone like us who are comfortable in our lives to counsel others who are struggling to look at what they can be thankful for. But it's a good exercise for all of us to take time to recognise the things in our lives that are good – the people who help us – the memory of good occasions – family – doctors who take time to treat us. There are always things we can be grateful for, and help us to keep at bay jealousy and covetousness and their consequences.

For us who are Christians, the second half of "A General Thanksgiving" from our Prayer Book for Australia is a most helpful set of words. "And, we pray, give us such a sense of your mercies, that our hearts may be truly thankful, and that we may praise you not only with our lips but in our lives, serving you in holiness and righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen."(Page 218).