

LUKE 12:13-21

When you train as a lawyer, it is necessary to spend a tiresome amount of time learning the facts and the decisions in law cases. I was obliged to spend late Tuesday afternoons for one year learning contract case law and I can say I remain scarred for life. Some cases are extremely memorable, *Cahill-v- Carbolic Smoke Ball* has an honoured place, together with *Donohue-v-Stevenson*, which has a series of unfortunate events involving a snail and a ginger beer bottle and I once owned a pair of rabbits called *Rylands-v-Fletcher* which is about escaping things such as swimming pool contents and cricket balls.

The most famous case is probably one that does not exist at all except in the pages of Bleak House, *Jarndyce-v-Jarndyce*, a case in chancery which dragged on so long and so pointlessly that it ate up all the money in the estate that was being argued about. I am sure none of you have taken part in unseemly scenes following the death and funeral of a family member. There are, alas, certain mutterings in my family over certain things that it would be impolite to mention but are brought out in situations with the regularity of those other stories about embarrassing things one did in one's infancy. They are part of the story of family life that tells us who we are and how we fit into our little microcosm of society. My niece, to mingled hilarity and alarm, has had a list for some years of the most beautiful items in my parents' house to which she wishes to stake a claim after their demise and has yet to be put off. The worst part is that I then find myself looking at this painting or that piece of glass and speculating.

So here in our gospel reading is a man who has gone above the appeal court and is asking God to sort out a row over inheritance. Perhaps the man asking was the second son and the oldest had taken all of the property, as he was entitled to do. Perhaps they were simply arguing over who got what. In our society, not only do we argue over who gets what and why others have more but we treat children as things and argue over them too when marriages break down. Jesus responds: *Friend, who set me as a judge over you?*

Now this is odd. Don't we expect God to be a judge over us? What about all that stuff in the Bible about judgement and the second coming and the sheep and the goats? Plenty of people live their lives in fear of a God watching over their every move and punishing them when they are bad. All of us from time to time tend to the view that God is responsible for the reverses that happen to us or when we don't get what we want, it's God who's responsible. On the other hand, plenty of people also believe that God knows all that we do and indeed has a plan and we can do nothing against his will. If God knows all that we do, why can't he manage our affairs? What's the point of prayer if we don't expect an answer?

Let's treat this not as a theological argument about what God cannot and cannot do but look at the words: *who set me....* This is not about what God can do, but what we can make God do. Those of you who are thinking nothing, have it right. We are not magicians. We cannot make God do things. This man wants to set God up as a judge and yes, it's about power. If we set God up to do things, we are taking the power of God on ourselves and let me tell you, that's going to end in tears.

We also notice in passing that Jesus certainly does not say yes, but he also does not say no, although there is no doubt that no is what he means. The answer he gives obliges the man and us to think it through. He replies with an open question. There is room for thought and development.

Perhaps the man went away and thought, *yup, he's right, there are other ways to solve this dispute, I can talk again with my brother.* Perhaps he went away and thought *huh, even God doesn't care about my problem.* We don't know. God also leaves us to work out some things by ourselves. It's called free will.

Now we go onto the parable.

This is not so much about being rich or not being rich but what we do with what we have. It's also about giving honour where honour is due. This rich farmer may have been a very good farmer, but where he started to go wrong was in thinking that it was by his efforts that he was rich. He was the one who was wholly responsible for growing abundant crops. He did not give thanks to God who gave him the rain and the earth and the seeds for growing. Also it's not much good telling your soul how well off you are because your soul doesn't do a lot of eating and drinking. This is a message Jesus gives us more than once, don't store up things on earth because they are of no use after you die and actually not much use while you are alive. The more you have, the more time you spend counting it. The more time you spend with stuff, the less time one finds there is for God. It's a matter of balance, not of whether we are rich or poor or what that says about us as people. There's no evidence that Jesus ever had very much and he never seemed bothered by it. He was helped out a lot by those who were well off. That's important. Fundamentally, Jesus was free from materialism, in other words he knew the price of nothing and the value of everything, including human lives. Perhaps we might try that too.

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1.8.10