I

‘For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’ What a powerful and memorable epigram that is. What capacity for instant image making in those two words ‘treasure’ and ‘heart’. Pirates’ coffers brimming with gold and jewels in the first, and a bright red organ beating with life in the second. It’s no surprise that this is among the best known quotations in the Bible. It’s almost as much a part of common discourse as those many phrases of Shakespeare: ‘wild goose chase’, ‘pure as driven snow’, ‘seen better days’, ‘heart of gold’.

Words like ‘heart’ and ‘treasure’ carry layers of meaning. When we think of treasure we may imagine gold doubloons and silver candlesticks, but it means too those things we relish and value, those things (in other words) that we treasure. And when we hear the word ‘heart’ we think of course of love, romantic love especially, with all its heart-thumping emotion, and all the dangers of a broken heart. We may think too of the essence, the heart, of things.

‘For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’: ‘For where what we value most, where what is our priority in life, where what we live for - there will be our love, there will be our essence, there will be what we live and breathe for.’

The context in which Jesus gives this warning makes clear that the treasure uppermost in his mind is money, wealth, the material things of this world. ‘Sell your possessions,’ he says, ‘give to the poor.’ Almost immediately before this uncomfortable exhortation Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool, that wealthy man who has crops enough to spare, and builds bigger barns to store them. He says to himself, ‘You have ample goods laid up for
many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.’ But God says to him, ‘Fool! This night you will die, what use then will be the goods you have banked?’ ‘So is he,’ says God, ‘who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.’

II

There is a very clear warning here for us, not least in our time and place of plenty, when the pursuit of wealth (and the houses, cars, and holidays it buys), can dominate our lives and fill our hearts. If we are honest with ourselves, who among us can say that they’ve never been tempted to give too much attention to things, or never worried about whether or not they are able to afford this luxury or that extravagance? What precedes this teaching of Jesus in Luke’s gospel makes plain that it’s not the things in themselves that are wrong, it’s our preoccupation with them, the value we place upon them, the filling of our hearts with them, and the worry they cause. Between the parable of the rich fool and Jesus’ talk of heart and treasure, he says to his disciples, ‘Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing . . . Instead seek God’s kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well.’

But it’s not just money and possessions that we make our treasure. Family and friends certainly have an important place in our hearts, and so they should. They need our love and the priority we give them, and these come to us naturally. But there can be dangers here too if that love becomes smothering and obsessive, leaving no room for God and neighbour. ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brethren?’, asks Jesus. ‘Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister and mother.’

Power, in all its manifestations, is another treasure. Power, like wealth, can, of course, be a good and useful thing. Without power decisions can’t be made, lives can’t be improved, countries can’t be defended. But power for its own sake, for its own pleasure, is self-regarding and contemptuous of others. We see it all too often today in our rancorous politics. We see it in the vanity of celebrities, in the narcissism of social media, and in the ruthlessness of ambition. These pursuits of power can be all-consuming in their intensity. They drive out respect for others, and leave no room in the heart for God or neighbour.

Religion can become this kind of treasure too. We must face the fact that religious beliefs and practices are not always about God. We know how the history of the Church is marred by bitter, often cruel, disputes about the minutiae of doctrine, or the right interpretation of the Bible, or which Christian denomination is the true Church. Pride in
being high Church or low, or in knowing how to bend the knee or say the creed, or pride in living a strict moral life - all these Pharisee-like ways of being religious can take centre stage in our hearts. We may think it’s God we serve but we’re often mistaken.

III

‘Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear it, a treasure in heaven that will never fail.’ What then are these purses, this treasure in heaven which should fill our hearts? What is it to be rich before God?

In the gospels Jesus would answer, I’m sure, the kingdom of God. That’s to say, living life knowing that God is sovereign, that he is of supreme importance, and that all the things of this world (though not necessarily unimportant) are as nothing worth compared to God and the doing of his will. It means living a life in which loving God and loving our neighbour come first and second. It means living a life in which prayer has a priority, and a life that acknowledges our imperfections, and trusts our salvation only to Christ, his cross and resurrection. This is the pearl of great price for which a merchant sold all he had and bought it. Amen