

I used to organise lots and lots of one off services in my previous job. The Head Verger and I used to joke that the service would only be valid if there was an argument about car parking and the collection. Collections are funny things. We don't have them at every service here, and sometimes people get really fussed, as if the service isn't valid without half the congregation suddenly realising that they haven't any loose change and wondering how they are going to save face, and the other half smugly putting their yellow Gift Aid envelope proudly on the plate, having already filled it in. And those who pass the plate on without doing anything either have a very thick skin, or have set up a standing order. But you just don't know who is who.

If you've read this month's magazine, or if you were here the last time I preached on 2 Corinthians, three weeks ago, you'll know that from now through to mid November we are focussing on Christian Giving: how we use our money (in addition to our gifts and talents), and how we decide to give some of that money to be a resource for the mission and ministry of the church, and the Minster in particular. On the front of the notice sheet is the Giving in Grace logo, and regular members of the Minster congregations and those associated with our life will be getting a letter and leaflet soon with that same logo on it.

At the most simple level it's about the collection. When the plate comes round, what happens? Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says that there is a decision involved. Giving which is cheerful, decisive, eager and generous (all words he uses in our reading today) is a million miles away from the moment of panic I described earlier when you do an instant calculation of the percentage of your loose change which will do – as if God is worth a bit less than a coffee at Costa. Instead, Paul talks about thought, reflection, planning. Above all it is voluntary. You give what you've planned, you seek to be generous, you look for a decent proportion, and do it with love and cheerfulness. It is your call.

The specific occasion for Paul writing about money is that the Christians in Jerusalem are in the middle of a famine, and Paul is trying to get the other churches, not all of them rich by any means, to assist them. But he doesn't start with the problem, as if to compel them or make them feel guilty. He starts with the theology, and the opportunity. The theology is that giving our money helps us to participate in God's generosity, shown in the gift, the grace, of Jesus Christ to us. We are rich in faith and belief and salvation and hope; we have the riches of heaven because God has first given to us. So in giving ourselves first to the Lord we demonstrate God's lavishness and generosity.

The opportunity is to help others, and to find in doing so that God's generosity is multiplied on us and them. We don't give so we can get more ourselves, but Paul is clear that if we sow lots of seed, much will come back. The opportunity is then to meet the needs of the church, of the saints, of the mission of God in the world, and in so doing to multiply praise and thanksgiving back to God. Just imagine what our giving away can do. Enriching, bountiful, generosity, grace, gift, cheerful, eager, blessing, abundance, thanksgiving, sharing. That's what giving is about. It's not mindless: Paul says specifically that "you must give as you have made up your mind", and so it must not be uninformed either. But the point is that what we have is not ours: it has been given to us. And what we have cannot

save us – think of that farmer in Luke’s Gospel. It is there to do good for others as well as bless us.

There are two big reasons to focus on our finances, on Giving in Grace, on stewardship. Like Paul in 2 Corinthians, there is a need. Every church needs income in order to fulfil its mission and ministry. We are a big church, with many opportunities and challenges. We are richly blessed, and many people have already taken up the challenge and planned their giving beforehand. I’m thrilled that 170 people give in a planned way, because it means we can then plan how to use that money wisely. Our needs are such that we must look for increased income, and that’s why I’m writing to everyone to invite you to consider whether what you’re giving remains the right amount, or whether you can start to give in a planned way if you don’t already do so. The immediate need is that the Minster requires a weekly income of £8,500, and we think our current income will be about £7,000 a week. We have reserves because of the generosity of previous generations, but we should live within our immediate means if we can. Any increase in planned giving is good!

The other, and deeper reason to focus on finances is that, as Paul found, what we do with our money reveals the essential truths of the Christian faith, of our joyful following of Christ, of our worship and prayer. Paul uses more profound theological words when talking about the collection than in most other passages of his letters. Grace. Ministry. Love. Service. Sacrifice. Gospel. Glory. Treating the collection as worship, as being like our hymn singing and praying, or offering our time and efforts in God’s service, treating it like that puts our money in its place. So while there may be a need to meet, the underlying call is to worship God with your money. It’s not yours or mine anyway. That’s what the farmer in Luke’s gospel found. Having a lot wasn’t the problem. Keeping it all was.

What we do with our money is part of our praying and our worshipping. I pray that as you think about Giving in Grace you will be able to make a review of what you do in this area, or maybe even start to give in a way which is a good example of the generosity of God. God deserves nothing less.