

On Generosity as a remedy for destruction

2 Cor 9. 9 - 15

Mark 4. 1 - 20

Minster - Stewardship - 15.11.15

I have just returned from a conference on the digital and online where one of the key pieces of advice was to be prepared to make rapid changes, because it is very fast moving indeed. You can plan all sorts of things, but events may just overtake you. The online world is not really any different to the offline world in this regard, just very very quick. You can organise all sorts of things, but then everything can change in an instant.

What was planned for this service was a review of our focus on stewardship: our financial giving to the Minster as part of our personal Christian discipleship. Regular worshippers at the Minster have received a letter from me with a simple request to review your giving, and the way in which you do it. We've preached over the last few weeks about the way in which our attitude to money is a reflection of our attitude to the love of God as revealed in the remarkable gift of love in the life, death and new life of Jesus Christ. We've looked at how our use of the material things God has given us are an outworking of our prayer and worship and discipleship, and I have been praying daily for all of you who have received these letters to make an equally prayerful response.

And I'm encouraged by the fact that people have responded, and that those who have done so have taken it very seriously. I don't know who you are, and will keep some distance between me and the information, but for everyone who has returned a form: thank you. That you have thought and prayed and let us know - that is enough. Some have decided to give more: by at least 20%, which is remarkable. Overall, so far, our planned giving will increase by 6%, and eleven people have indicated that they want to join the scheme for the first time, so that figure will increase. But three out of four people who received letters have yet to return them. Never mind the fact that most of them were delivered by hand by your clergy ... it would be encouraging to receive more forms back and to know that you have considered the call carefully. I've also been aware that some people have joined us more recently and won't have had a personal letter. If you would like to join in there are 'Planned Giving' letters just for you and signed by me in the A Frame and at the Highgate entrance.

I say that this was the original plan, and I thought that this would even be instructive for those watching us on Church Live, streamed via Periscope on Twitter. An ordinary group of Christians considering something which every Christian disciple has to do. And then came the devastation of the attack in Paris, coupled with outrages in Beirut and Baghdad. What on earth could a sermon on stewardship and money and giving have to say in such world, and to such brokenness?

Perhaps this. There are many responses and reactions to violence and killing on such a scale, perpetrated by those with little regard for the value of the lives of others and for their own earthly existence. The desire for blame, revenge, justice, the instinct to be merciless, to compile a kill list, to declare war, to attack, not to stop work until every vestige of this evil is rooted out for ever. The desire to find a cause, to ascribe a reason, to shape a reaction, to hit back, to do...something.

A philosopher of international importance died recently. Rene Girard looked at the world from the beginnings of human time until the present, and reflected carefully on what defines human history: a cycle of violence and revenge. Simply put (and he can be very complicated) he said that, left to humans, the cycle of violence will continue, because there will always be someone to blame, someone on whom to take revenge. No human motive is pure, and even the most watertight legal process will leave someone resentful and determined to get even. In human history there is no 'even', always someone to blame, and therefore attack. What is needed, said Girard, is for the cycle to be broken, and he saw that in the death of Christ for all of humanity there could be no revenge. God willed that all human brokenness and devastation be wrapped up in the free offering of Christ. Jesus puts all deaths to death, all injustices to death, all pains to death. Jesus stops the cycle.

Some of the reaction to the outrage of the killings in Paris has talked about overwhelming evil with good. This finds its source in the complete self-offering of Christ, the sheer loving gift of God. How will we overcome such violence, such evil? With love. With generosity. How will we overcome the tyranny of selfishness which demands that people are subjected to views imposed on them by a fundamentalist and oppressive interpretation of the will of God? With humility. With generosity. With giving away, not keeping to ourselves.

In the end what we do with our money is not about whether Beverley Minster, or your church or charity, breaks even or goes in the red. It's not about whether you think the Finance Committee has got the budget right, or whether you think the brand of coffee served is too expensive (though, of course, careful stewardship of finance is important). What we do with what we have is about how we demonstrate to a world which, left to itself tends to selfishness and oppression and dictatorship and violence, that what will conquer is love, and giving, and offering. What we do with what we have is not about imposing our will with our money. It is about showing that the world, in its brokenness and devastation, will be transformed by generosity and giving without hope of benefit.

That giving, in Jesus, stops the eternal cycle of revenge, and places justice and mercy at the heart of a shattered world. So perhaps your reviewing how much you give to your church will not just be about making sure you have heat and light and clergy and music and mission. Perhaps your giving will save the world.