

Generous Giving ...

... a life consecrated to God

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Diocesan Coordinator of the Generous Giving Programme, Sami Tooze, on 9th February 2020, in Beverley Minster.

1 Chronicles 29:10-17; John 15:1-11

In his well-known book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis brought together what he saw as the fundamentals of Christian religion. Rejecting the boundaries that divide Christianity's many denominations, Lewis found the common ground on which all those who have Christian faith can stand together. Within his narrative, he wrote about his principles of giving and generosity: he wrote, "Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from movement to movement is given to you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to his service, you could not give him anything that was not in a sense his own already." Today in Beverley Minster, we are marking the beginning of our period of reflection on 'Generous Giving': we are all invited to consider the resources and gifts that God has given to us, and how we might respond to that through giving to our church. This is a subject that the Church of England has always found challenging, but one which enables us to sustain and grow in the ministries in which we all share.

Perhaps we should begin by asking ourselves why giving is such a challenging subject: it's a challenge because it forces us out of our comfort zone and into a place where we must place ourselves and our resources to God, before our own desires. It is particularly difficult, I think, if we're part of the Minster community where it's easy to look around at the many projects which sustain our day to day life and ask, "How could my giving ever make a difference?" It also challenges our priorities by asking, "Do I give what I have to spare or, in the words of the post communion prayer, do we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice?" Giving is something that Jesus talked about on a par with prayer and love, and is rooted in our state of heart and our calling as disciples.

As we begin this period of reflection on 'Generous Giving' as a community, I'd like to suggest three things to help frame our thinking.

The first is that we are invited to give as a response to God's generosity to us. God is by nature a God who gives. In fact, it is possible to read the whole Bible as a narrative of giving: in Genesis, we see God's gift in creation to humanity, and despite our continued failings, God keeps on giving and giving from the mundane to the miraculous - the pinnacle being the well-known words in John's gospel, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life." It's God's nature to give freely and without limits: in Jesus, he gives us everlasting life and love, and as Christians, we see God as the source of all things that are good; as creator, God gives the created order, and entrusts it to humanity to care for and to be as responsible stewards. This is the point which C.S. Lewis was reflecting on, that through God's gifts, everything that we have been blessed with comes from God and therefore our perception of ownership may need adjusting. In our first reading this morning we hear King David recognise this, when as an immensely wealthy man he has given, largely out of his own resources, vast amounts of building materials, precious metals and stones for the House of God. He says this, "All things come from you O God, and of your own do we give you." He understood that he himself was only a steward of these good things: in the first case, they came from God himself, the creator and giver of everything we have. David has been entrusted with them and in giving them for the building of the temple, he was in fact giving back to God what was God's in the first place?

Secondly, we can reflect on where that giving goes and for what purpose. The end point of all our giving is that it enables ministry and mission in our church, and that in turn enables the church to grow and to be Christ in the world. Here in Beverley Minster, that manifests itself in such a variety of ways: through our worship; the care of our building which speaks beyond itself; the music which underpins our personal and collective prayer; our home groups and other small groups, all of which offer an opportunity for people to encounter God's love. Of course, all of this is God's mission, and the best part is this he invites us to join in. In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes about the churches in Macedonia who give financially to support sister churches. To describe this, Paul uses the word 'grace': gifts of 'grace' from one church to another for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints.

This, I think, eloquently frames the lens through which we are invited to view our giving as gifts of, or expressions of 'grace' which enable us to participate in God's work.

Thirdly, through giving, we grow as disciples. In the gospel reading this morning, Jesus eloquently describes himself as the source of all life, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit. My father is glorified by this, that you much fruit and become my disciples." It's important that we fix the image clearly in our minds: Jesus didn't say, "I am the 'stem', you are the branches," - he is the 'whole' vine, and so we are as much fully part of Christ as he is fully part of us. Our relationship is one of mutual abiding, of each making our home with the other, and by abiding in Christ grounded in love, we bear much fruit; fruit or gifts, which in turn help us to grow as disciples. Being a disciple means to follow Jesus, to go where he goes, to look on the world with his eyes, to love the world with his heart, and to give our lives with his for the sake of others. As we follow him, we are invited to catch the vision of that generosity and become more like him: we are called to bear the fruit of being a disciple, to use the gifts which we have been given and to take joy in giving the very best that we can offer. Like the grape juice from the vine, together our fruitfulness will blossom as we allow God to transform it abundantly. To abide in Jesus as the vine is to bear the fruit of discipleship, to follow with courage and obedience, and to live our lives with grace and generosity, which in turn reveals the generosity of God. And that includes the state of our hearts when it comes to our giving to our church: 'Generous Giving' is a spiritual issue as well as a practical one. As baptised Christians, our identity lies not in ourselves, but in God through Christ, the true vine; our independence, our free will is offered in the service of God. Every bit of us belongs to God: our work; our leisure; our gifts; our time; our money. As Christians, we can never escape that fact because God created and chose to enter the material world and be born into it. Material things and spiritual things cannot be separated.

Giving is about our state of heart, our strength of faith and our humility, putting God's mission and the people around us, ahead of ourselves and our own desires. Our commitments to being disciples is the tiniest part of a relationship in which God is committed to us, capturing all of our offerings and making of them something beautiful and glorious.

I'd like to conclude by offering some words of the hymn writer Frances Ridley Havergal, who eloquently frames our reflections on our response to God's generosity:

*Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.*

*Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in endless praise.*

*Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
Every power as Thou shalt choose.*

*Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.*

Reading Texts

- To Follow