

Generous Giving ...

... *Generosity as a Way of Life*

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, on 23rd February 2020, in Beverley Minster.

Acts 4:32–37; Matthew 6:19–21, 25–33

Over the last couple of weeks, we've been exploring the theme of generous giving and of what it means to worship a generous God, and I've been preaching about giving often enough now to realise that there are basically only two sermons about giving: there's the fear-based variety and there's the faith-based variety. The fear-based sermon 'riffs' with the idea that if we don't increase our giving as a church, something dire will happen: the building will become unusable and have to be closed; if we don't pay our free-will offer, we'll incur the wrath of the archdeacon and the diocese will ostracise us; at the next interregnum, we'll never get another vicar because nobody wants to be a vicar of a church that can't pay its bills.

And the annoying thing about fear-based approaches to giving is that they can be remarkably effective - when you give people a target and say unless we achieve this financial target, something dreadful is going to happen, it's amazing how the money comes in. But the problem with this way of talking about giving is that it does play on people's anxieties and fears. There's nothing joyful about it. And in fact, it can lead to a kind of giving that is at best dutiful and at worst resentful. Even worse, it can create a sense that people only have to give when the church is in need, and it can then look as though the church only wants money to spend on itself, which makes our giving a rather selfish activity. And underlying all of that is a really rather worldly attitude which sees money simply as a medium of exchange, as a means of getting something. When you buy something, you're not actually giving money away, you're exchanging it for a commodity, a car or a book or a meal out. And when we bring that attitude into our Christian giving, it means we don't want to hand money over unless we can see what we're getting in return: a weather-tight building, for example; or a hall that's warm; or a salaried youth worker or administrator.

In other words, we're not really giving our money away at all. At best, we're entering into a partnership with other church members to get something that will benefit the church. I want to suggest that that isn't really Christian giving. It's more like Christian buying, which is pretty much the same as any other kind of buying in which I still own whatever it is I've bought.

So giving that is genuinely Christian is the other kind: it's faith-based and is coming from a completely different direction.

Faith-Based giving follows a different kind of logic. It says, 'God is generous; we've been made in God's image; therefore we should be generous.' It goes, 'God has given us this earth to live in and this life to enjoy and therefore, none of it's really ours anyway.' 'Freely we have received, so freely we should give.' And God's generosity is personally costly. God doesn't give from some surplus store that he doesn't really need - God gives even his own son, and Jesus gives even his own life.

In other words, God's generosity holds nothing back: He doesn't seem to be worried about the cost. Why not? Because God is the God of the resurrection; He is the source of life; the source of growth; the source of abundance and fruitfulness; He's the Lord of the harvest. I wonder whether you noticed in the first reading how it described this ideal early church community, where no one was in need because they shared everything. What struck me about that passage was not simply the idealism of people holding things in common, but it was the verse in the middle that said, 'With great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.'

And what's fascinating about that is there is no direct link made between the resurrection of Jesus and the common ownership of property, but clearly the one makes possible the other; the reality of the resurrection takes away our fear. And that, I think, is the thrust of Jesus's teaching in the gospel reading this morning, where he says, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink." He seems to be saying, "Fix your heart on heaven, and the earthly goods will seem less important." "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things will be given to you as well." And so against that background, our giving can be generous, not because the church's needs are great (though they are great, and I could easily overwhelm you with some enormous figures about what this

place costs), but our giving can be generous because it's part of our worship. And I think giving money to God is like singing praises to God: we do it because it sets us free and makes us feel better - not because we want to acquire some extra commodity.

So Christian giving is like Christian worship: it's essentially useless. We don't worship God because we get something in return - we worship God because we've been set free, and that's our response. Similarly, we shouldn't be giving money *in order* to repair the roof or pay for ministry - we give out of our resources of time and money because we have been set free from putting our hope in the things of this world. It's a sign that the chains binding us to mammon have been broken. So giving is an expression of our Christian faith and discipleship. And in that sense, it really doesn't matter what you give to, so long as you give: you can give to Oxfam or you can give to your grandchildren; you can give to Beverley Minster or to the Cat Protection League - the causes we choose to support are less important than being set free from the love of money. And our love of money tends to be linked to our fear of the future: we store up our investments because we don't know what the future holds. And that fear of the future is what is challenged by the gospel of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: if God can bring life out of death, then what's the worst that can happen; if Christ is risen, how can we be afraid of the future; if Christ is risen, why on earth do we think that money is going to save us?

So as Christians, we don't give *in order* to support the church or keep the church going - though it's true, we may feel some responsibility for the church - rather, we give as an expression of our faith in the God of the resurrection. We give as an act of worship; we give because as disciples of Christ, we are leaving everything in order to follow him. And as disciples of a generous God, we are learning to cultivate generosity as a way of life. And when we do that as a community, we shall not only meet the expenses of the church, we shall also be able to make an impact on the world around us: in past generations, Christians were so generous that the church was able to build schools and hospitals and homes for old people. Wouldn't it be wonderful, if Beverley Minster was known as a place of generosity; a place of hope, where people weren't anxious about their material needs; a place where the risen lord truly has set us free.

After the service, I shall be giving a short presentation over coffee to try and provide some information about the Minster's finances so you can get some idea of what we spend our money on, and you can get an idea of all the wonderful things we are able to do with the money that you give. And on behalf of the minister, may I thank you for your generous financial support, because many people here really are very generous.

But I hope that I've made it clear that what matters in the end is not meeting the needs of Beverley Minster, but allowing ourselves to be set free from serving mammon, so that we can worship the God of the resurrection with our wallets as well as with our hearts.

Reading Texts

Acts 4:32–37

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷ He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Matthew 6:19–21, 25–33

¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.