

Generous Giving ...

... and nobility of spirit

A sermon given on the Last Sunday after Trinity, 23rd October 2022 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 25:31-46

The sermons in these few Sundays around now are focused on our theme of 'generous giving' as part of this renewal campaign that we are conducting (more about that I will say at the end of the service). Another way into this morning's gospel, the parable of the sheep and the goats - I want to start by reminding you briefly of two other gospel passages on the theme of giving. Firstly, in Matthew 6, Jesus utters a warning about practising your piety in public, so whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you. Then secondly, there's the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple with the Pharisee boasting, among other things, about how he gives a 10th of all he earns. Interestingly, Jesus does not query the truth of what either of these men have done, but he clearly condemns them. He's saying, yes, they may have given, but they've not given for the right reasons. One of them is doing it in order to be seen to be generous, to be a man of generosity, helping the community. And the other thinks it's a basis for him to be able to claim righteousness before God.

You can give for the wrong reasons, you can give as a basis for righteousness - self-righteousness, or as a way of raising your status in the community. But for Jesus, this is a long way from true generosity. The word generosity, which we use a lot, actually has an interesting origin. It's originally meant in Latin, 'nobly-born' and then came to mean 'noble spirit', a person of noble spirit was generous. There's a sense in generosity of abundance, of giving more than we actually need to. So we talk of someone making a generous donation to a cause, or we speak of somebody behaving generously in a given situation. We're saying, yes, there might have been a certain demand to do good, but a generous person is one who goes above and beyond. It's not just tied, therefore, to material things like money. And that comes out very clearly of this morning's Gospel in the parable of the sheep and the goats.

There's a lot that we can mine out of that parable. It's worth noting to start with about whom Jesus is speaking in the parable. It's not about his followers such - it's about all nations. So presumably those who have worshipped the God of Israel and those who have not. It's about the judgement of all nations. And what is very striking in this particular

parable is that people are judged not for what they believe, but for what they actually have done in life. Jesus is very pragmatic, 'You did or did not do this', period.

And in the various ways people have or have not been helped: some are to do with direct giving, so giving food to the hungry, or clothes to the naked, or drink to those who are thirsty; but others are much more about a quality of generosity, welcoming the stranger, visiting the person who is sick or in prison. So real generous giving goes beyond something popped in a box or a cheque written out. And we can see that again, a very good example in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Yes, he provides practical help and he pays the innkeeper for that continuing help that the man may need. But he goes a lot further than that. As a Samaritan, he would be viewed as an outcast in Israel, but he doesn't allow the prejudices of centuries to stand in his way. He sees somebody in need and in all generosity, he reaches out. Then comes the real crunch line in the parable: "Inasmuch as you did or did not do this to the least of these, my little ones, you did or did not do it for me."

Jesus is saying generosity is about our whole relationship with God, not just charity in its narrowest sense. And sometimes church stewardship campaigns can look as if they are attempts to squeeze a bit more money out of the congregation. But that is only ever very much part of the story. What we are being asked to do, and not just during a specific campaign like this generous giving one, is to be generous in the whole of our lives - to be noble-spirited as opposed to being mean-spirited, in every aspect of our being.

And ultimately, our generosity is a reflection of God's generosity to us, the whole creation. We ourselves are the product of an overflowing loving generosity of God. Without that, there would be nothing and no one. Indeed, the word grace, which we use so frequently in our worship and appears so often in the Scriptures, means a gift, an expression of generosity. And the generosity of God is linked as well to our own generosity, our own willingness to respond. In Luke 6, we hear, *"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back."*

And at the very, very heart of this understanding of generosity is the incarnation, the life, death, ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Summed up in Jesus's words to Nicodemus in John 3, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life."* Jesus expresses his generosity in his ministry: his reaching out to the lost; his healing of the sick. We see it in the parable story of the turning of water into wine at Cana or the feeding of the 5000.

But supremely, we see that generosity in his willingness to give up his life in order to bring about our reconciliation with God. And that's why generosity has to embrace all of what and who we are. Perhaps the last verse of that great Good Friday hymn 'When I survey the wondrous cross' puts it: *'Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.'*

Let me finish with a story, a story that to my mind, perfectly illustrates the difference between limited charity and real generosity. When I was a student, I was fortunate enough to attend a university mission by a man that some of you may have heard of, Archbishop Anthony Bloom. He died a few years ago, and in his day he was the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in this country. He was a man of great spiritual depth who wrote very wisely on prayer and led with distinction that community in this country. And he told us this story about himself as a young man.

His family were Russian, and they had to flee at the revolution, leaving everything behind. And so he found himself in Paris in the early 1920s as a very poor medical student. One day, as he was walking to the medical school, he saw a man begging, and he put his hand into his pocket, and all he could find were two sou (now, some of you may remember they were the tiny little fraction of the old French Franc). So he pulled them out of his pocket and gave them to the man. Much to his surprise, the man jumped up and started to thank him profusely. "But I've only given you a couple of sou" said Anthony. "Yes, said the man, but you are the first person today who has actually looked at me as he gave me something." That is nobility of spirit, that is generosity. Not just a mark of charity, but a generous giving of his whole self.

May we all seek to live like him.

Reading Texts

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."