

Generous Church...

... Generosity for the World ...

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday before Advent, 30th October 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

2 Corinthians 9:6-15; John 15:1-11

Let me tell you a story from one of our daughter churches, St. Peter's Woodmansey. Earlier this year St. Peter's was setting its budget. You'll know that it's not a big church. The congregation is often in single figures, and its expected income this year was less than £8,000. Nevertheless, the church council decided to allocate £4,000 - that is, over half of its income - to the 'Free Will Offer' to support the ministry of the Diocese of York. The 'Free Will Offer' is a gift to the diocese to cover the costs of ministry. It used to be called the 'Parish Share', but it was felt that this was too transactional, like a payment for services rendered. The 'Free Will Offer' is not a payment for services received - it's a gift to help cover the costs of mission and ministry in this diocese, and the diocese tailors what it spends accordingly. So St. Peter's made a gift of over half their income, despite some anxiety about what other costs might unexpectedly arise. And within a few weeks of making that gift, they heard they were going to receive a legacy - of over £40,000. That is, they were going to receive a sum more than ten times as large as the sum they had decided to give away. Now, I'm not saying that that's a strict example of cause and effect - you can't calculate that by giving you are going to get more back. But the Biblical promise repeated over and over throughout the Scriptures, in the Old Testament as well as in the New, is that God blesses those who are generous.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have been reflecting on this theme of generosity. Two weeks ago, we were thinking about how God Himself is generous and how that generosity is woven into the fabric of creation. We live on this planet which supports life: the sun shines - for free; the rain falls - for free; the air can be breathed - for free; the world turns and day follows night; spring follows winter. All for free. And God gives his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, to enter the world, to stand alongside us, to die and be raised for us, that we might live forever as children of God. God holds nothing back - all for free.

And yet, somehow we have corrupted this world of abundance and grace and turned it into a world of commodity and transaction, where what was given as a common treasury for all has been given a price so that it can be traded and accumulated, and that gives us all a sense of possessing something that is 'ours' and nobody else's: and so a world full of abundance has

been turned into a world that feels like it's full of scarcity; where there's not enough to go round; where some have accumulated huge amounts and others don't have enough to live.

Last week we were thinking about what it means to respond to this generous God by living generous lives, and how the life of worship and discipleship and trust in God's grace is a life set free from fear of scarcity and the urge to be greedy and accumulate more for ourselves. And today we're thinking about what it means to be part of a 'Generous Church' - a community called together, not to serve our own interests, but to be a sign of God's kingdom for the world; a community which tries to reflect the generosity of God: in the generosity of its welcome to others; in its willingness to offer a generous hospitality; and its desire to pour itself out in the service of the wider world.

And the reason we are having this emphasis on generosity over these weeks is not so that Beverley Minster *itself* can be kept financially safe and secure and comfortable and viable. The vision is much bigger than that: the vision is that Beverley Minster should be a sign of the love of God for his world; where we are moved by the Spirit of Christ to reach out into the wider world. It's the amazing vision, shaped by the Gospel, that understands our community to be God's means of revealing his love to the world. So just think about that for a moment. This community - full of imperfect human beings, many of us damaged, many of us hurting, many of us struggling to believe and to trust, many of us overwhelmed by a sense of our own neediness - this community, in all of its jagged brokenness, is God's chosen vehicle for making his gracious love visible.

And one of the ways we can do that is with our money. We can give to support good causes that relieve suffering and try to make the world a better place. We can do it individually and we can do it as a Minster, because the PCC gives away a proportion of our income to Christian partner organisations. And we can also make God's love visible through our giving to the church because the 'Free Will Offer' I was talking about earlier doesn't just pay the costs of our own clergy, it also contributes towards the costs of ministry in other parts of this diocese, where congregations in poorer areas have no hope of covering their own costs without help from the wider body of Christ. And it is slightly embarrassing for us at the moment that we have been unable to sustain our historic level of giving through the 'Free Will Offer', so that at the moment, we're in danger of actually needing to be propped up by parishes that really are less wealthy than we are.

So let's try to change that. Let's embrace that bigger vision of a church generously serving others. The context of the first reading from the second letter to the Corinthians was a famine facing the church in Jerusalem, and St Paul was organising a whip-round from churches in

Greece. And in the reading, he commends the relatively poor churches of Macedonia who, despite their own severe afflictions, as he puts it, 'have overflowed in a wealth of generosity'. And he's pointing this out to the much wealthier church in Corinth, urging them to get on board. He says, *"As you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking."* [2 Corinthians 8:7]

Not everybody here can give more, I know that. And whatever you do give, 'Thank you'. Your generosity helps the Church to be more truly and authentically, the Church. But some of us could give more. Some of us may not yet be involved in any planned and regular giving at all. So please take one of the brown envelopes in the box by the door on your way out. Because it's full of information about how we can give efficiently, effectively, with a minimum of administration. If you do so, please take your name off the list, which is a list of names on the electoral roll, so that we know who's taken an envelope and we can send others out to others who we know would want to be involved in this.

And if you want to know more about how Beverley Minster spends its money and uses it to reach out, do come to the meeting that's there in the notice sheet on Tuesday evening [1st November 2022] at 7:30pm in the hall, which will be explaining a little bit more about how we use our money to support the ministry of the Gospel in this town and diocese. And please consider our calling to live as a Generous Church for the sake of the world. St Paul says, *"God loves a cheerful giver, and God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."*

Reading Texts

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." ¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

John 15:1-11

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.