

Living Generously

A talk given on the Third Sunday of Lent - 23rd March 2025, by the Diocesan Generous Giving Advisor, Jan Gray, in Beverley Minster

Isaiah 55.1-9; Luke 13.1-9

Good morning to you all. I've had a lovely warm welcome this morning. I've been at the eight o'clock one, and I've been at the 9:15 one, and now I'm here at the 11 o'clock one, and it is great to be with you. I am the Generous Giving Advisor for the Diocese of York - my role is all about inspiring generous living - the parts of us that God gave each of us: skills; values; time; prayer; everything - to live generously.

What brought me to this place was I was a restaurant manager in York; then I've had 34 years in education, in primary education; I then went into looking at finding solutions to poverty with the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust; that then led me to work with people in Hartlepool who were living on the streets and struggling with addictions or sex workers - and I can tell you that was one of my best learning experiences because when we're thinking about a culture, we need to come alongside each other - coming alongside people and encouraging each other. So you won't hear me saying, 'You need to be doing this. You need to be doing that' - because I don't know. But what I do know, when I've spoken with Reverend Eileen and Jonathan, the magnificent generosity of your hearts, the generosity of future generations that we are sitting on and in. But we want it to flourish and we want it to grow more and more.

I'll just give you a heads up. My sermons are no longer than 10 minutes, so you can '*shoulders down*', okay. But I'd love to say a prayer first of all. So may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Now hopefully we're going to have a really inspiring and exciting time ahead of us. You've each got a pack. Together, we're exploring ways to live more generously. But as I am speaking, please keep in mind the terms '*whole life generosity*' and '*generous living*' rather than '*generous giving*'. This is all under the banner of, 'Of your own do we give you back, Jesus? We're only giving back what he's already given us. So let's think about the Bible readings. We've got Luke and we've got Isaiah - and how do they live and actually work into whole life generosity?

Well firstly in Luke, Jesus shares the parable of the barren fig tree - if you've all got a garden: you've got that rosebush or something like that and it's just not growing; you're cutting it down; you're feeding it; and you just think, 'One more year. I'll give it one more year' - and thankfully, the gardener convinced the owner of the fig tree - nurtured it and it changed. And that's what we can do with each other: nurture each other; come alongside; help each other to grow. It gives us a chance to change, because sometimes we all need second chances, (third chances, sixth chances - I've got - had - three teenage boys - say no more).

Secondly, in Isaiah, we're invited to know that anyone who thirsts to come to the waters and actually go to Jesus and God for nourishment and blessings that don't cost money. This passage encourages us to live generously by sharing our resources and blessings and trust God for his provision. You know, his grace is sufficient for all. Therefore, combining these verses, I've come up with three ways that we can live generously and the first one is to be

patient and show forgiveness. Like the gardener, we need to make sure that we are as patient and forgiving as possible in Christ's strength, and it gives others the opportunity to thrive and transform. Secondly, we've got sharing our resources - Isaiah calls us to come and eat freely and share our resources, just as the vineyard keeper did. Because in that, that watching and listening world will go, 'Okay, we're slightly different here. Nobody's casting me off. Somebody's actually looking after me.' Then we embrace God's ways. God's ways often come left field - answering our prayers in ways that we didn't want. And when we look back years later and we go, 'Okay, God knows what he was doing.' It doesn't feel like it sometimes.

When we show our kindness and generosity, we are part of his bigger plan, and we make a transformative impact in ourselves and in our communities, and we need to be aware of that. So to expand on this: a Kingdom-focus (meaning Jesus-focus) catalyses for us a glorious adventure with Jesus where we learn to deeply rely on him and his empowering grace to help us flourish in our churches and our communities - it's a life built on abundance. But if we live like this: 'I had better hang on to what I've got because you never know, something might just happen' - well, we can't give and we can't receive because we tend to shut down. But if we live like this, 'Okay, Jesus, I am going to trust you.' I know we've all been on the opposite end of generosity, and it's a marvellous thing. So knowing our purpose in life is actually very freeing. None of us are here by accident. Each and every one of us are given something. Actually, some of us have got the gift to spot gifts in other people - *Have you noticed you're a really good gardener? Have you noticed you've got an artistic skill? Have you noticed you've got a glorious singing voice?* (This is an absolutely stunning choir here.)

So let's think further. How do we respond with those gifts? Well, could it be with the youth club? Joining the PCC? Is there a garden that needs to be absolutely tended to? - all of these things that you commit to are life-giving. These are wonderful and deserve deep gratitude and praise. To help you make your decision, you might just want to choose one thing and do it well. One of the things that Reverend Jonathan and Eileen would like to point out is our gifting - our gifting of money is an act of worship. The Parish Giving Scheme is a way to give money to your church: it's like a direct debit; you sign up; you can do it online; in your pack, there's a sheet that you can do it by post; or you can phone them. What happens is your gift of money is given to the Parish Giving Scheme. They automatically put on the gift aid, and it all comes back to your church free of charge (the church commissioners are paying for this. It costs you nothing). And the gift of that is that treasurers have got some time back - they're not going to go to the bank with the money (you can imagine how difficult it is going to the bank nowadays). There's also a short video on your website to show you how to do it. I've seen the transformative work that planned giving enables this beautiful building to plan for the future. Now, if we capture that, capture the joy of giving, you are giving back to Jesus for him to bless it.

In conclusion, living generously offers extending grace, sharing our blessings, and trusting in God's abundant provision. Discipleship in this way offers us a transformative joy for our souls. It gives us a sense of freedom that we trust God to bless it. However, what you need to hear is that if this is not for you a time to change what you are doing, that is fine. And thank you for everything you are doing. And if actually you are in a time of need, then you need to speak to the people around you, because we are in this together, and we will help you.

And as I finish my talk, I'm going to encourage you with a prayer from Reverend Dr. Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London. And he says, (sorry, it's not a prayer, it's an ask):

If you don't give because nobody's ever asked you, we're asking you now.

And if you don't give regularly because you've never got round to it, today's the day.

And if you don't give much because you think this benefice doesn't need it, we're telling you it does.

And if you don't give a lot because you don't have a lot, well, that might just be an example to somebody else who can come alongside you.

And if you don't give because nobody's ever thanked you, then we are thanking you now.

And if you already give until the pips squeak, (I had to look that up because I had no idea what it meant - it means that if you're giving the maximum that you can give) we say thank you, it's wonderful. And again, it might just nudge the next person to you.

May we know the experience of living generously.

I'll finish with a prayer.

Dear Jesus, we thank you for the gift of life, your example of whole life, generosity and salvation. We have given a short time here today to ask now for your inspiration and wisdom in how we can live generously. But we know this is a lifelong endeavour. May we understand that our individual acts of generosity become a collective which shows the world that is watching and listening to us, your love, hope, and joy. Please inspire us and strengthen us, claiming your promise that those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed. Amen..

Reading Texts

Isaiah 55:1-9

¹ Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³ Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴ See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵ See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. ⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷ let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:1-9

¹ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them-do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.' ⁶ Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" ⁸ He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." '