

I do like a good oxymoron. It's a phrase where two words which are normally opposites are put together. The Greek word it derives from means 'sharp dull', and you get the picture from that. Try 'dark light' or 'open secret'. There are some great lists of funny oxymorons, like 'airline food', 'jumbo shrimp', 'military intelligence', 'customer service', 'irate patient' and 'student teacher'. Interestingly the Christian faith makes much of serious oxymorons. How about 'precious death', or 'washed in the blood', or 'in his service is perfect freedom'? And what about 'eager giving'?

Yes, it's that Sunday that seems to come around all too quickly when we think about money and giving. If we based the number of our sermons on the themes Jesus spoke most about then we'd be preaching and thinking about money every other week. It's that important, because our money has power. It consumes our thinking, and we worry about it. I think that every organisation I've been involved in has worried about whether the Finance Committee has had too much power. 'We're being run by the accountants' is a cry I've heard all too often. But think what it's like when you lose a five pound note, or when a precious and valuable possession goes missing. It feels like a part of you has gone missing too.

And in these difficult financial times the power of money is even more evident, because we don't have enough of it. Somewhere very deep down our sense of security gets wobbly because we might not have enough money to survive, and so we concentrate on it even more. Money consumes: emotion, thought, energy, spirit, our very beings. That's why the financial decisions taken by the PCC are the ones which generate the most controversy. Interestingly the PCC – and it's any PCC – will often talk for ages about a very small sum of money, and much less about large amounts. Perhaps it's because the small sums are familiar to us: we deal every day with tens of pounds, but not often with thousands of pounds. But the money talks are the ones where tempers fray.

That's why it's important to put money in its proper place, and to give our talking about money and giving a theological framework. Our parish turns over more than £350,000 per year – and we add to that the £150,000 a year generated for the building by the Old Fund. That's what our ministry and mission costs each year, and the first thing to do is to ask for your prayers for Tony, our Treasurer, for the Finance Committee and for the PCC and the Trustees of the Old Fund as we look to raise and use that money wisely. Regular worshippers contribute around half of our income, and for that I am grateful and humbled. We need to pray for each other, that we get our giving right, for we all share in this ministry. And we need to pray for all the other ways in which we raise funds – all the commercial and visitor activity, the Shop, and the gifts and donations given by those we don't know.

My oxymoron was 'eager giving'. The theological framework for giving, and reason why Christians can be eager to give our money and possessions away, is that when we give we take part in the vast and boundless generosity of God. Everything we have from God is a gift. We earn nothing. The only right we have to be here is the right God has given us.

There is nothing we can do to generate God's love for us: it is simply there. Look at the words to the people of Israel given through the prophet Zephaniah. It's spoken to a broken people, a people under judgement, a people in pain because they know, and have reaped, the consequences of their actions. And what does God do? He takes away judgement, repels enemies, lives in the middle of them, rejoices over them, renews them, restores their fortunes. The people know they are forgiven and restored because their economic life has been renewed. We have money and possessions because God gives them, and when we learn to use them like God uses them, we will discover the boundless generosity of the God who gave them. Hoarding is what people do. Giving is what God does.

In giving we participate in God's generosity. And in doing so we take the opportunity to make a real difference. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says that the crisis of famine for the Jerusalem church was an opportunity for the other churches to discover what it was to be generous like God is, to be loving like God is, and to demonstrate the reality of the body of Christ. That's why we don't keep all the money given to Beverley Minster. We give it away, because we are the body of Christ. Some goes to other ministry in the Diocese of York: however you calculate it the ministry the Diocese provides is worth less than the amount we contribute in Parish Share. But that's not the point: we are one body in this diocese, and those who have much give to those who have little. We also give away a proportion of what is given by our regular worshippers to mission projects across the world. This is not a grudging requirement: it is an opportunity to discover the generosity of God and the unity of the body of Christ. By giving their cash the Corinthians discover three great theological concepts: *diakonia* – service; *charis* – grace; *koinonia* – fellowship. Just by putting money in the collection. How good is that?

It's right that we should scrutinise our accounts, and use money carefully, because it's important stuff. I prepared this sermon with the Bible at my left hand and the management accounts at my right hand. Our underlying principles as we do so – as you look at your money and see what would be a sensible proportion to give away, and as the PCC work out the best way to use what we have been given – our underlying principles are grace, fellowship, service, opportunity, generosity. People who are 'rich' according to Jesus in Luke 6 – satisfied and secure in their possessions – have got what they want now. But we look forward to encountering the full generosity of God, and encounter it every time we give away and do that eagerly. Our principle is this: we give, in good measure, for the measure we give will be the measure we get back.