

THE GENEROSITY OF GOD

BISHOPS' DEANERY VISITATIONS

Coventry Diocese 2007

- GIVING is NOT THE SAME AS FUNDRAISING
- GIVING is BASIC TO CHRISTIAN LIVING & HEALTH
- WE DO NOT GIVE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF A BUDGET

Giving is much more important than that. It is *essential* to our spiritual health. It is a sign of living in that life in all its fullness that Jesus longs for us to enter and enjoy. It is a sign of Kingdom life. Giving sets us and others free. Giving sets givers free to receive *more* of God's grace. Giving, freely and in God's name, sets others free. It is Kingdom-building.

I have brought an icon of the Holy Trinity, revealing amongst other things, the exchange of love constantly being given and received in the life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Known, in the East, as the icon of hospitality, inspired as it is by Genesis 18, where Abram and Sara offer hospitality to three Persons, they later discover to be God himself. This icon invites the viewer, each one of us in, to share in the divine life of the Trinity, to become as Peter writes '*partakers in the Divine Nature*' (2 Peter 1.4). There is a strange Greek word *perichoresis*, used in Orthodox theology which again reminds us of the movement and exchange of God's love in terms of *dance*. We are invited to share in the dance of Divine life. '*I'll live in you if you'll live in me, I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.*' It is a dynamic understanding of God's life-changing love.

I have also brought this water fountain as another image of the movement of God's love, as Jesus described the new life that he brings as '*streams of living water*' (John 7.38).

Let me ask you a personal question! Are you a bath person or a shower person? In a bath, once the water is in, it stays in. You wash yourself in the water and then you lie in the dirty water until you get out! In a shower, there is always new and fresh water. God's life is always new and fresh. Are we living in this new life, receiving and giving or holding on to what we've got and becoming stagnant? Are we *conduits* or *containers*?

I want you to open your hands. You need open hands to give, you need open hands to let go, you also need open hands to receive, to bless, to touch and to heal.

Now, close your hands. With closed hands we cannot give, we cannot receive, we cannot reach out to touch, to welcome, to embrace or to heal.

The way of the world, of the 'old Adam' within each of us says, the more you give, the less you have, so hold on tight to what you've got, indeed get, grab even more and hold on to it.

The way of Christ, the subversive and liberating truth of the Gospel teaches us that as we give, we become more truly the ones we are created to be, as we are made in the image and likeness of God, the giver of all things. As we give we open ourselves up to receive *more* of God's grace and provision, we remain within the prodigal and life-giving love of God. Withholding who we are and what we have takes us out of the flow and deprives us of the oxygen of the Holy Spirit.

Rockefeller was once asked, '*How much money does it take to make a man happy?*' To which he responded '*Just a little bit more*'. I guess, at one level, if we are honest, we might all recognise that somewhere in ourselves and we can all give all sorts of good reasons for it. But is this desire our master or our servant? Jesus could see so clearly the spiritual danger of the wrong attitudes towards

money, how it can imprison us and prevent us from enjoying the glorious freedom of the children of God.

You will know the story of the monkey or '*How to catch a monkey*'...

You will remember the account of the Rich Young Man who having met with Jesus, went away sad, with a heavy heart, he could not let go, he was (as someone put it) possessed by his possessions.

So where are we, as individuals and as PCCs or Diocese in all this? To what extent are we in captivity through wrong attitudes to money? To what extent are we actually, despite all we would like to think and be keen to profess, *in hoc* to *Mammon*?

Thomas Merton wrote '*Money has demonically usurped the role of the Holy Spirit in much of our life today.*' How often, in our personal lives, in our Church life, in our Diocesan life is money the key criterion for our decision-making, coming before and displacing the seeking the mind of God and the wisdom of the Spirit? What does God want to happen? If he wants it to happen, provision will be discovered. How easy it is for me, for us to collude in the 'sensible' accountancy thinking of '*we can't even think of doing that, because we haven't got the money.*' So we miss out on God's plans and provision for us.

In 1987 I spent 3 months with a Christian community in Washington D.C., an area of great poverty, with many street people, refugees, high unemployment, poor housing, high levels of drug addiction, prostitution and criminality. It was a hugely impressive ministry rooted in inspired worship, a real and daily engagement with Scripture, and expressed in great variety of ministries changing lives and communities. (A ministry unlike so many lop-sided ministries which took seriously both the King and the Kingdom.) It was a difficult Church to join. The Church welcomed all unconditionally but to be a full member, there were particular commitments. You had to have a particular call to a particular ministry which you will offer to God and to others. You had to join a group of others with the same kind of call, to work with them in the same area of ministry whether it be in housing provision, or refuge for asylum seekers, or health or healing, or coffee shop ministry or whatever. As part of the induction for membership you had to write not only your spiritual autobiography, tracing the journey of your relationship with God from the time of your earliest memories but you also had to write your *financial* autobiography tracing your relationship with or your attitude to money from your earliest memories. Both of which exercises can be profoundly helpful and revealing, bringing to light, as they will, areas of our own lives which may still need the liberating ministry of Christ.

It may just be that the priorities of our lives and the decisions we have made actually reveal that there is another Master in our life and as Jesus says '*No-one can serve two masters.*' (Matt. 6.24). But as with the Emperors New Clothes, we collude with one another in avoiding facing this truth.

Or we could come at it from another angle: Are we building/have we built our identity, our self respect more on what we have and our status amongst others than on our primary identity as infinitely precious children of God, with whom through the Spirit we can enjoy intimacy and call 'Abba', Father.

Such questions, I suggest are not for instant answering but for a real and prayerful pondering over days – perhaps this Lent. What is in no doubt is that God loves us so much, he wants to set us free in our relationship with money as in every other aspect of our lives. '*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.*' (2 Cor. 3.17)

2 Corinthians 8 & 9 provide us with a window into the flow of grace, gratitude and giving. In fact the passage is full grace '*charis*', the word is used 5 times in these few verses though not always translated as '*grace*'.

v.1. Paul writes: *'We wanted you to know about the grace/charis of God that has been granted to the Churches in Macedonia.'*

The secret, the source of their giving was *grace*.

Grace overflows – that image of flowing again – in giving.

v.2. *Their abundant joy and extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity.*

At a time of great affliction, God is giving these Christians abundant joy (v.2) and out of this joy in the Lord flows their generosity. Grace – joy – generosity – giving. And it is not as if they are wealthy, they are giving out of their extreme poverty (v.2). Many of us who have travelled abroad to Christian communities in areas of great poverty will have been stunned by the generosity of hospitality we have been offered, given the very best and most valued of what the people had to offer. No meanness of spirit, no holding on to the best for themselves, not even what we might call a sensible apportionment of resources, *'well we'll give you something nice but we need to keep plenty for ourselves'*. A radical *prodigal* generosity echoing the prodigal generosity and love of the Father for each of us. And it stuns even Paul *'they give according to their means and even beyond their means'*(v.3) The grace of God overflowing in generosity. We might think of the despised Zachaeus who when he experiences the acceptance and love of Jesus is set free and cannot help but give (Luke 19.8). He says to Jesus *'Half of my possessions I will give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone, I will pay them back four times as much.'* The grace of God given to him overflows in almost reckless giving.

He no longer needs to hold on to his money to give him security or to buttress his identity, he has discovered, he knows on the inside that he is loved by Jesus. We see this outflow of giving, this reckless generosity in the woman who has discovered and experienced the forgiveness of Jesus, and she ministers to him with extravagant love and devotion as she anoints him with the most costly of perfumes (Luke 7.47) as in this batik.

MUTUALITY

v.4. These Christians in Macedonia saw generous giving not as a duty – *'well, I suppose we ought to give something'* but as a joy and bringer of joy. Paul tells us:

'They were begging us earnestly for the privilege/charis of sharing in this ministry/koinonia to the saints.' The privilege of giving is grace/charis. The word Paul uses for this 'ministry' is *koinonia*. One of the essential marks of the Church is *koinonia* – which means fellowship or mutuality, belonging to one another, helping and supporting one another within and across the Body of Christ. And here they are begging for the privilege, the grace to support other Christian families who are struggling. (As some of you will know from conversations I've had with Christian leaders suffering great affliction in Middle Eastern countries, I've been convicted by one Christian leader who said Christians in his country are missing the support and solidarity of us Christians in the West.) Here Paul tells the Corinthians – and us today - how the Macedonian Christians begged for the privilege of giving. When I was in Oxford Diocese, we had a link with the Anglican Diocese of Kimberley and Kuruman and I remember one of their priests who was in our Diocese telling us how every year in his Archdeaconry, clergy and lay representatives from every parish go away together for a weekend for mutual prayer and encouragement and during the course of their time away, they compete with one another about which parish will give the most into the common kitty to be used to support those who were struggling the most. It is a very inspiring and humbling ministry. This is gospel giving, bringing joy to the givers. It is the kind of free and generous giving that allows us to enter into more of God's blessing for us. So Paul, quoting Jesus says *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* (Acts 20.35)

Here, in this passage, this ministry/*koinonia* is for the saints in Jerusalem. So we see this gospel principle of mutual support across cultures within the Body of Christ.

So where does this grace of giving come from? Paul is in no doubt.

v.5. *Because they gave themselves first to the Lord.*

This is surely the heart of the matter for them and for us today. Giving the *whole* of our lives to God and that includes our financial lives. As Martin Luther wrote '*there are three conversions necessary for the Christian life, conversion of the heart, conversion of the mind and conversion of the wallet*'.

Giving ourselves *first to the Lord* is the preventative medicine that will help us to avoid what one wag has called '*cirrhosis of the giver*'. What is '*cirrhosis of the giver*'? "*It is an acute condition which renders the patient's hand immovable when it is appropriate to move it in the direction of the wallet, chequebook or purse. One treatment which always works is to remove the patient from Church. It is clinically observable that this condition does not occur in other places like the pub, the shops, the restaurant, the golf club etc.*"

Gospel-giving however is win-win. It releases more joy in the givers, it blesses and encourages the recipients, as Paul writes, it '*supplies the needs of the saints it overflows with many thanksgivings to God*' (2 Cor. 9.12) and it glorifies God.

Win-Win, Giving opens us – and others – up to more of God's grace and blessing. Gospel giving calls for faith, for trust in the Living God. I have never known any individual or any PCC, for that matter, who has taken a step of faith in giving, who has ever regretted it or who have found themselves worse off for doing so. Giving builds our faith, and we discover more of God's love and provision.

I have a friend who gets very annoyed when people say to him '*take care*'. He says '*no, take risks*'. The more we dare for Jesus in faith, the more we discover the riches of his grace. Jesus invites us to trust him, to take a step in faith, to life in all its fullness.

Or as someone said '*If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat!*'

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse

Trust me in this ... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it. Malachi 3.10

Jesus said '*Give and it will be given you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put in your lap.*' Luke 6.38

+John Stroyan