

Giving - 26th October 2014 - 2 Corinthians 8.1-7 Luke 12.42-48

Lord God you show your generosity to us in so many ways, release our generosity that we may give ourselves in your service. F J S @

We have just heard one of Jesus parables about servants being faithful to absent masters. It is a common theme in the Gospels.

We might find it a bit hard to relate to, as we don't have servants in our culture.

But it is not difficult to put ourselves in the position of a servant. Most of us know what it is like to work for someone else. Some days you are working with the boss there and then there are those rather special days when the boss is away for one reason or another!

Then you can relax a bit and work more at your own pace. But it is so easy to take advantage of those situations. And find you are have a really long chat with a colleague when you both really ought to getting on with your work.

The point Jesus is making is that the faithful servant is the one who carries on serving whether or not the master is there. The employee who gets on with their job whether the boss is there that days or not.

Jesus takes the point further, he says that some servants can get so used to the master being away that they abuse their position and abuse the other servants they are working with. Jesus wants us to think of their shame and the reaction of the master when he comes and catches them at it.

So Jesus concludes:

If God has been generous with you, he will expect you to serve him well. But if he has been more than generous, he will expect you to serve him even better.

Of course all this has direct application to the way we give ourselves in God's service.

When we became aware of how generous God is with us, we naturally want to respond in generosity to him.

There will be times when we are so overwhelmed by God's love that we will want to give our all to him.

But how do we sustain that in the ups and downs of life, when life seems a slog and it feels like God has gone off and left us to it. Like the master in the parable.

For this is all very much part of the Christian experience. My experience is not to feel wonderfully in touch with the love of God all the time. There have always been those wonderful times when I feel bowled over by God's love.

But they usually come a little unexpectedly and unbidden - suddenly I am again 'surprised by joy' to borrow a phrase from C S Lewis. Suddenly it is as if a cloud has been lifted and I am able to see the way things truly are.

But those times do not last for ever, sadly. So we have to hold on to the truth of those times by faith.

For the Christian life is sustained by faith and not just by feelings. Feelings are all important. But the Christian faith is all about faith. Trusting God because of what we know of him, rather than what we might feel on any particular day.

And Jesus makes it clear that our faith is demonstrated by remaining faithful even when the feelings are not there to carry us along. Like the servants who remain faithful even when their master is not present.

So, how do we do that? How do we sustain our faith and put it into practice?

Making sure that we are giving ourselves in God's service is very important. Giving ourselves in regular prayer and worship, bible reading and fellowship are all important.

Though they can all be really hard at times. We all go through dry periods where worship, prayer and bible reading can feel such a slog. Sometimes we might be being nudged into doing things a different way, but other times the response of faith is just to keep going as we are.

We also need to make sure that we give out as well as receive.

In nature, a lake which only collects water will soon become stagnant.

Last week we are travelling around Windermere and seeing all the streams pouring down into the lake. But just as it is filled with water, so water flows out from its southern tip. The river Leven is only a few miles long, connecting Windermere with Morecombe Bay, but it is a powerful gushing torrent. All that water following out to the sea.

We need to give as we receive. We need to give our time, our talents and our resources in God's service.

And one of the resources we have is our money. So how should we give our money in God's service?

I think our giving should be:

Prayerfully proportional

Thoughtfully sacrificial

Joyfully generous

and realistically regular.

Firstly: prayerfully proportional. The bible is clear that we should give in proportion to the income that we receive. The figure of 10% is often mentioned in the bible. And though this is a useful marker I am reluctant to make too much of any particular figure for two reasons.

Firstly I have it on good authority (from those who can do numbers better I can) that though 10% may work in a society when incomes are reasonably similar, when they are markedly different 10% is much harder to give for those on a low income than those on a higher income.

The second reason is that it can become a bit of legalism, we decide a certain figure and it all depends on keeping to that. I am sure that God is much more flexible, and certainly he wants it all bathed in prayer.

That said the Church of England does suggest that we give 5% to our local church and 5% to other charities. And that may be a helpful suggestion.

So our giving should be prayerfully proportional.

Secondly, thoughtfully sacrificial. Giving to God will feel like a sacrifice, that is part of faith, there will be times when giving what we feel we should, **will be hard**. It will mean, at times, going without something we might otherwise like to have or to be able to experience.

But it is not about wearing a hear shirt all the time, God also delights that we should at times enjoy good things.

There may be times when we give less than we have been able to give in the past. That may not feel easy, but that is the reality. Our incomes go down as well as they go up.

But there may also be times when we find that we can be more generous, times we receive things unexpectedly, and times when we just want to respond to God's generosity to us.

So, our giving should be thoughtfully sacrificial.

Most of all, our giving should be joyfully generous. God is wonderfully generous to us and he loves us to reflect his generosity.

And there is something wonderfully liberating about being joyfully generous. A liberality, a freedom from the constraints of possessions, which have a way of possessing us as we possess them.

We heard a snapshot of joyful giving in our first reading. Even though the Church in Macedonia **were going through hard times and were very poor, they were glad to give generously. They gave as much as they could afford and even more, simply because they wanted to. They even asked and begged to have the joy of giving their money for God's people.**

Our giving should be joyfully generous.

Finally giving should be realistically regular. If we are not regular with our giving it so easily to get forgotten. And regularity makes it so much easier for us as a church council in our budgeting when we know how much is likely to be given through the year.

A great way to give is by standing order, that takes a lot of the remembering out of the equation. But be realistic.

The church council give by standing order to the Diocese, but we don't give all the money that way because we don't always have the money in the bank, so along with the regular amounts we top it up from time to time during the year as and when we are able to do so.

We need to be flexible with our giving as well as regular.

Our giving should be realistically regular.

This year we will be again having a time when we can give additional gifts to God's work. There won't be a gift day as such but in a few weeks we will be giving you all great little a booklet written by Bishop Steven and a short letter to remind you of today and this time of focus on giving.

Then in a month's time on Sunday 23rd November we will celebrate St Paul's 167 birthday. And on that day the focus will be on the ways in which we serve God as members of this church, and the ways in which God is using us in his service. And, I hope, celebrate the gifts given.

For this is what it is all about. We give to enable God's mission to take place. Our giving enables so many good things to happen here at St Paul's. Our giving enables us to care for one another as well as to reach out with the Good News of God's love.

Back in Lent we met together on Wednesday evenings. We worshipped and prayed together. We saw how we have links with places all across the city and we thought together about our gifts and God's calling to mission. We looked at our Mission Statement and grappled with how God was using it to shape our mission and ministry.

The most powerful thing for me was the way we identified gifts in one another and since then we have been able to draw out some of these gifts, these ways of serving God, these aspects of mission.

Our giving enables this to happen.

As part of this, at the end of this service we will be reaffirming our mission statement.

Do take this service sheet home with you so that you can reflect again on what God has been saying to us through it.

But our mission is not just to this community and the wider communities we are part of.

Throughout our Diocese and beyond we are part of a network of churches serving God in every community.

We are all part of this wider mission and ministry.

It starts with the generosity of God and is brought to life when we respond to this generosity, when this generosity is seen in us.

Last week, we saw a video about Nyipock in South Sudan. A man in a very poor country who had been a refugee but now returned. Christian Aid enabled him to build a house and set up a business, baking bread for his community.

The generosity of others enabled him to make a difference in his community, and even to give away some of his bread – passing on the generosity.

I talked about Jesus' parable of the farmer who had a bumper crop and wondered what to do with it all. In worry, and self-interest he concluded that he should tear down his barns and build them bigger, so that he would have food for years to come.

But those listening to the parable would have known that he could just as easily been generous to others with that bumper harvest and still had enough for himself.

What a difference generosity can make. What a difference our generosity can make.
Amen