

## The Grace of Giving

Haggai 1:7-9

2 Cor 8:1-15

Matthew 25:14-30

It used to be the case that you could not speak about certain things in polite company – sex, religion and politics.

It seems to me now that sex is openly talked about in the media, in chat shows and even on BBC Radio 4! Religion is also talked about widely, particularly by Muslims and Jews, perhaps the least by Christians, who are often afraid to defend their faith. Politics is openly debated all over the place, especially now with heated arguments – people at their worst, refusing to compromise and talking ever more loudly to reinforce their views. It's all out in the open.

However, the one thing that people are still reluctant to speak about candidly is money...people may flaunt their cash or drive a flashy car or complain how expensive everything is, but to be open and honest about how much you earn, what income you have or what you spend your money on is considered, quite rightly I'm sure, to be a private matter. Those who do brag about their income are considered socially inept, gauche. Money is off-limits.

So, I'm going to talk about it...

The Bible is full of talk about money...there are directives about giving in the Old Testament, there are parables about money in the New Testament (Jesus didn't hesitate to speak about money, so I'm in good company), and we have lots of snippets from St Paul's letters about money – the most famous of course is from his letter to Timothy, often misquoted, that money is the root of all evil. More correctly, "The love of money is the root of all evil" 1 Tim 6:10.

Chapters 8 and 9 of St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians are all about Christian giving -- not tight-fisted, miserly, grudging giving, or wild, spendthrift, careless giving, but true, generous, gracious, abundant, what Paul calls "hilarious" giving – our translation said, "a cheerful giver". We might even call it "joyful". The amazing thing is that Paul does this all in two chapters without once mentioning money specifically! Clever man.

But he does talk about the giving of wealth to the church unashamedly. He begins Chapter 8 with an example of giving from the Christians in Macedonia. He writes,

*"...during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in **a wealth of generosity** on their part... they voluntarily gave according to their means, **and even beyond their means**, begging us earnestly for **the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints**".*

The background to this, the severe ordeal they suffered, is the great famine that struck in the land of Palestine (reported also in First Corinthians), when many people were deprived of their livelihood.

The new Christians of Jerusalem were suffering because they did not have enough to eat. When word of this came to Paul, he decided to enlist the aid of all the Gentile churches for the relief of Jewish Christians. He thought it would be a marvellous way of expressing the oneness of the body of Christ and the breaking down of the middle wall of partition between the Jews and the Gentiles, so, wherever he went, he told them about the need in Jerusalem.

The critical thing here is that Paul made the need clear...he talked about it. **Clear information on the needs of the church!!**

When Paul mentioned it to the Macedonian churches (the churches of Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea), the response was tremendous. Paul was greatly encouraged, as he tells the Corinthians in our reading this morning.

In this Macedonian response we have a wonderful example of the true way to give and a lesson for today's church. We can be **inspired** by their generosity.

**These Macedonians gave because their hearts were moved by the grace of God.** The extent of their giving is then highlighted by the apostle. They ignored all the possible excuses for not giving, and even pleaded to give more.

The Macedonians gave beyond their means. They dug deep, and they begged for the privilege of doing so. That is the amazing example here. Evidently Paul was reluctant to tell them about the need in Jerusalem, because he did not think they could respond. But, when they heard about it, they insisted he should let them take up a collection to give to the church community in Jerusalem. People can't give if they don't understand the need.

Then we come to the difficult decision of how much to give. Making the decision of how much to give to the church and, not forgetting, to other important charities, is a tough one.

**The simple question is, how much does God own of our wealth?  
The simple answer is, all of it.**

1 Chronicles 29:14 reminds us that, "Everything we have comes from God...and it is from that we give back to God". Jesus later told us to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's – implying of course, that to pay our taxes is good and right for community, but we must remember that what we have is all from God.

When we also remember what Jesus gave for us – paying the full price for our redemption – what small matter is it to give sacrificially back to his work?

It's not a question of paying all our bills and taxes first and seeing what change we have.

**Christian giving comes first; we live on what is left.**

Without pressure, Paul goes on to the Corinthians exhorting them to consider what giving is -- a manifestation of a heart that has been touched by the love and grace of God. He offers the **invitation** to respond to the need.

**One of the greatest marks that someone's heart has truly been touched by the grace of God is that they respond to the invitation to give as a real privilege.**

Giving is not compulsion; it is a willing response. Paul continues, "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver".

I think this is summarised by the title "The Grace of Giving". It is in giving that we receive grace.

**The choice as to what to give to, as much as how much to give, is ours, yours and mine, too, but it should be a gracious, generous and sacrificial response to God's love.**

I included the reading from the prophet Haggai today, as it is about giving for the upkeep of the Temple – the symbol of the worship of God – and sometimes controversial issue in the face of the needs of the world. A building like this, as I have often said already, is not a church without a living worshipping congregation in in. And that is the point the prophet is making – worship must be central to our Christian life. And if worship of the loving generous God is central to our lives, then all I have said above applies, because all that we have is God's. No, we don't need a building to worship God, but if the buildings are a genuine part of our witness to these villages, to show that there is a lively, healthy body of faith here, and I think that is the case, then we are tasked as stewards with finding the way of maintaining them. It may be, as Gary Watson from the Diocese said to the PCC, by **informing** those around us of the needs we have, by being **inspirational** in our generosity and joy and then by **inviting** people to get involved and play their part in God's work here. That's not just the vicar's job, the responsibility is ours together (=TRIO).

And the Gospel reading – it is a sermon on its own, but the nub of it is that we are given wealth to be used generously in God's service, not squirrelled away or used for other things.

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And so to action:

I've avoided statistics, but I have to share one figure. I do not know what anyone here gives financially, except myself. I do know that we collectively do not give enough to maintain the ministry here in the future – to cover that requires an average of £46, not a maximum, **an average of £46 per month per member of the congregation**. Even at that rate we would still get back from the diocese more than we give in ministry costs.

Perhaps we should aim to give more than needed to the Church Life Fund for the Parish Share, like the Macedonians who gave more than they could afford. We can then help poorer churches to stay afloat and keep their ministry going. Wouldn't that be great...and we can, perhaps should, also think about being generous to others too by supporting charitable projects. The PCC will have to consider that.

And then we can start to think about maintaining each of the church buildings.

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Finally,

I may have said some controversial things. I hope I have not offended anyone...if I have, then please tell me what I have said to offend you and we'll pray together. Don't grumble to other people, please talk to me.

Together with my letter, that you may or may not yet have received about the current state of the finances here, I hope that I have at least provided some food for thought.

**Please prayerfully reconsider your giving to God's work – is it first on your budget or out of what you have left?**

If you don't give regularly to the church, please sign a Standing Order form, so we can budget and keep the ministry going, even when you are not here. You can always put more in the collection when you can attend!

**I must repeat St Paul's words, "God provides us with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, we may share abundantly in every good work." That is the Grace of Giving.**

Please be bold – let's talk about money and give cheerfully and in abundance.

Amen.

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