

Christian Giving

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As a vicar I am fortunate to be able to leave questions of money to others, such as the wardens, finance and stewardship committees and treasurer. Such is the good work that has gone into the parish giving leaflet you have received today.

But if others have the job of worrying about and raising money, one of my tasks is to highlight and illuminate what Jesus and indeed the Bible have to say on the subject.

In the eighteen months I've been at St John's, I've never spoken about money from this pulpit – though, at the risk of making myself unpopular, I am going to today.

I'm not going to make it a habit.

Neither will I shout or thump the pulpit.

But I *am* going to talk about money and I have good grounds for doing so, because Jesus himself spent a fair amount of time dealing with questions of money.

For instance, people's attitude to money is the theme of many of Jesus' well-known parables.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the parable of the Talents; the parable of the Rich Fool.

The Sermon on the Mount, of which today's gospel is a part, is not only subversive to the values of the empire, it's a set of marching orders for those who want to follow Jesus. There is a lot of bad stuff going on in the world; this was true in Jesus' century, just as it's true in ours. Jesus' teaching in the face of all that is wrong with the world is consistent: have faith, and do something about the bad stuff by doing all the good stuff you can.

In a parish context, it is extremely easy to justify worrying about the basics. "How will we pay the electricity bill? Can we afford employees to clean or do administrative work?" ~PCCs and finance committees feel an understandable obligation to be sure that parishioners' money is carefully spent, and we are no exception

But if we were to listen to Jesus today, we might well hear him speaking frankly to us on the subject of giving.

If we are sitting at the top of the comfort scale, we should not be worrying about getting more, but about how to share what we have. If we sit at the bottom of that scale, we should not regard that as permission to lie, cheat, and steal our way to comfort.

But more than a moral admonishment, this message claims God's care for everything God has made: people, lilies, the birds, you name it. The whole of creation.

Jesus once even sat by the Temple Treasury watching what people in those days were giving to their Church - the synagogue and reflecting on their sense of values.

Generosity should be measured not just by what we give, but what we keep back for ourselves. Perhaps like me, that makes you feel uncomfortable. That's the real challenge. Yet we cannot be too generous to a God who has given so much to us. Remember the story of the widow at the temple in the New Testament. She only gave a few coins yet it was all she had. She had nothing left: Jesus loved her for it but perhaps she was over generous. As Jesus sees what we give, would He think us generous?

Importantly, our giving should be proportionate. It should be in proportion to the amount we have and in proportion to what we spend on ourselves. For example, how does our weekly giving to the church compare with what we might spend on grabbing a coffee in town or going out for a meal: or to the cinema or theatre? Once we understand that giving should be proportionate then we need to ask, how much? Clearly, it's going to be different for different people.

You may like to reflect on the fact that it will cost £4.50 to keep this church open for the length of this sermon. That's £20 for the service.

Doubtless, you will think it worth considerably more than that!

Because £4.50 may not seem much, it works out at around £436 per day, or just over 3,000 a week.

You may have heard this story:

a woman dropped a coin into the collection plate as she entered church.

After the service she complained bitterly at the low standard of the preaching.

Her seven year old son interrupted:

'Well, what can you expect for a quid Mum?'

Yet we miss the point if we think that giving is about the amount on the plate. Nor is it about just paying the bills.

We know about the poor widow who put the two small coins into the Temple collection.

Jesus was sat watching the crowd putting their money into the Temple collection.

Many people were putting in money, some giving large amounts.

The poor widow put in two small copper coins –

perhaps like someone putting two pennies in a collection today.

Jesus said that she had given more than all the rich people who had put in large amounts.

When it comes to giving, it is often, the poor who set the best example.

So, giving does not revolve around the amount of money we have.

The churches in Macedonia, in St Paul's time, were very poor, but this is what he said about them when all Christians were being asked to help the Christians in Jerusalem, financially:

"As I can testify", he wrote, they begged us "...earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry..."

The Christians in Macedonia didn't just take part in the collection, they *urgently pleaded* with Paul because they considered it a *privilege* to take part.

Although very poor, they considered it a *privilege*, to help their fellow believers in their time of need.

Giving is about our love for God and our love for others.

We don't often think about giving as a privilege – we see it as an obligation:

something we have to do. It's something we think we ought to, or we feel guilty if we don't – we see giving as an obligation.

It's no wonder that talking about giving, is so unpopular.

We know that money is essential for running things, but we don't like to go into too much detail about how we collect it.

Is giving a burden or a privilege?

When was the last time someone stood up in a PCC meeting and said: 'Parish Share? I think it's a privilege to be paying the Parish Share!'

We give to what we believe in – if we are confronted with famine victims on TV, for example, we are moved to give to help them.

We believe in the cause and we support it with our money, and maybe our time or efforts as well.

When it comes to giving to God's work, giving to the church – do we really believe in it? Do we really believe in the cause?

It has been said that we put our money into the things that mean most to us – a house, a car, our family, our hobby or whatever it might be.

We invest in what we believe in.

Jesus said:

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6.21)

If our heart and our treasure are with our family then that is a wonderful thing.

But if our treasure is not committed to God's work as well, where is our heart with him?

Do we really believe in God's cause?

Do we invest more in our hobbies than we do in God's work?

When we grasp hold of what the Bible tells us about giving, we are more free than we can ever imagine. Giving is not a burden, it is a privilege and a joy.

Think of how wonderful it is to give a Christmas present to a child, or anyone else for that matter.

It gives real pleasure to see someone enjoy what we have chosen for them.

It doesn't feel like a burden to give those presents – in fact, I probably get as much out of seeing them open their presents as they do.

Jesus also said:

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

That is why giving is a privilege.

We feel blessed to give to others.

It is a good feeling.

Think about a time when you gave something to someone – a gift, or a helping hand, or a listening ear. Didn't it feel good to do that?

You gave out, but you got something back as well.

If we ourselves benefit when we help others, how much more do we benefit when we give to God – whether we are giving of ourselves or of our money?

When we start to think about our giving to God's work as a privilege, it changes the way we give and it also changes the way we receive.

We give, but we get back more than we can imagine.

Prayer, Church going, using our time and talents for God and offering back some of our income for the spread of the gospel is all part of what it is to be a Christian. They are not options – they are part of what defines us as followers of Christ. He loved us so much, he gave his life for us – we should in turn show our love for him – and maybe it will be costly for us too.

Today I ask you to review your financial giving to St John's in the light of our financial position and yours and if you would like to increase it please complete the planned giving pledge and if it is to be a regular commitment complete the standing order form. Thank you. Please think and pray about this seriously, it will have an impact here at St Johns and in our local community and within the wider world.

We value your support and will do everything within our power to ensure that we honour and respect your generosity. Thank you for your prayerful and careful consideration.

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