

St Mary's Holy Communion 5th March 2017

1st Sunday of Lent – Stewardship 1

1 Chronicles 29:10-18 Romans 8:31-39 Mark 6:30-44

here's a question I've asked before, but it's one worth asking again: is your glass half-full or half-empty? in your own life, do you feel you have 'enough' or is there a constant sense of 'lack'? two weeks ago we heard Jesus urging us not to worry, and we wondered then how many of us could say of our lives, as God did on the seventh day of creation, 'indeed it is very good'!

or what about our town? did you watch that Panorama programme during the week about Slough and benefits or otherwise of immigration? there was a clear divide there, between those for whom this is a 'half-full' or 'half-empty' issue!

and when it comes to the life of the church – are we half-empty or half-full, are we struggling to keep things going and to make ends meet, or do we have enough resources? that question can apply to a range of parameters in church life – people, energy, time, spiritual depth, fervour in mission and so on; but for these next few weeks our focus is principally on money: this is our annual 'stewardship campaign', where we invite people to think seriously and prayerfully about their financial contribution to the church

for each of us there is a named envelope (or you can pick up a blank one) containing this colourful brochure, a letter (from me) and a response form and envelope

the brochure lays out the financial situation of the Parish for the coming year – the demands upon us and the ways we hope to raise funds, through hire of halls, service fees etc., but above all through 'stewardship', that is, the regular, committed giving of ordinary people – you and me; and be clear about this – nobody else is going to do it! others may give to the cats' home, but only Christians will be giving to the church!

here in our literature we try to balance the element of *need* – 'this is what's required to keep us going', with the element of *vision* – 'this is what we want to achieve in the Parish for the kingdom of God'; when we lose the vision and just look at the figures, we can easily find ourselves in 'half-empty' mode, so that stewardship becomes a matter of anxious calculation – how can the church possibly keep going? then our own response can also become anxious and fearful, lacking in vision – how can I possibly contribute more, with all my other commitments?

today's readings challenge us instead to think *at least* 'half-full' and to embrace a vision of *abundance* rather than *scarcity*, for our own lives as well as for the church

in 1 Chronicles 29, King David is giving thanks for all the gifts the people have brought for the building of the first temple in Jerusalem; there are familiar words here, from our Communion service – 'yours, Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory ... all things come from you and of your own have we given you'

however we give to the church, by cash, envelopes or bankers order, it's good to recognise this moment in the service as the point of connection between that financial transaction and our faith and worship

I wonder if it sometimes feels that God is like a parent who's given us our pocket money but now wants some of it back! so we can find ourselves thinking in *scarcity*, 'half-empty' mode again, grudgingly parting with a little, and hoping no more will be demanded of us see instead what David says here: 'all this abundance comes from your hand'; and, 'your people are offering it freely and joyously back to you'; that's *abundant*, 'half-full' thinking, which leads to cheerful giving! can we think about our giving in that way? can we make that connection between our money and our faith?

the same sense of abundance comes through in these verses from Romans 8, where Paul writes of the overflowing grace of God; 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?'

here's an antidote to even the greatest of anxieties, the fear of death itself, because 'nothing can separate us from the love of God'; if we trust God for life and death, how much more then when it comes to our anxieties about money! as Paul puts it: 'if God is for us, who can be against us!'

but this is a hard lesson to learn, as the disciples discovered in the story of the Feeding of the 5000 in Mark 6: they've been very busy, walking the dusty roads, preaching and healing around the villages, and they're tired out: 'For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat'; so Jesus invites them to 'come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'

that 'deserted place' reminds us of Jesus' own 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness, on which our season of Lent is modelled; for the start of Lent, I've just had a couple of days of solitude and silence on 'retreat' at Burnham Abbey

now a 'retreat' might suggest something negative, like an army backing away from hostile forces, a way of avoiding reality; but the opposite is true! in Lent, in the 'wilderness', we seek to come face to face with reality in a way that isn't possible in the normal busyness of life – I strongly recommend finding that sort of time for yourselves this Lent, even if it's only an hour or two carved out of a hectic day; make time to stop, to listen, to learn

so too here in 'the deserted place' the disciples learn things about themselves, about who Jesus is and about the *abundance* of God's provision for them and for the world, that they'd never have found out in their normal, safe, comfortable surroundings

the starting point is Jesus' compassion for the people, who've followed him and the disciples around the lake, for they are 'like sheep without a shepherd'; despite exhaustion, Jesus continues to minister to them throughout the day

when it gets late, the disciples are not unfeeling towards the crowd, they see they have need of food, but they lack any sort of vision for how they might provide for them, instead telling Jesus to 'send them away'; that makes me think of times I have shut the door of the vicarage at the end of a busy day and hoped against hope that no one else will bother me for a bit – I feel I've run out of resources; 'Jesus, just send them way!'

but Jesus won't let them off the hook: '*you* give them something to eat', he says; you can hear the cogs whirring in the disciples' heads – '5000 men, plus the others, half a loaf each, so many loaves a denarius ... 200 denarii: where are we going to find that kind of money?'

it's like us confronted with over £100,000 of Parish share to pay this year – 'where are we going to find that kind of money?'

Jesus starts from where they are: 'how many loaves have you? go and see?'; back comes the answer: 'five loaves, two fish – you see, we told you, it's hopeless!'; we're not even 'half-empty', we have far less than that!

now see what Jesus does with this seemingly insignificant offering: he takes it, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to his disciples to distribute; we can see a parallel here with the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread and wine at the Eucharist – God transforming small things into something wonderful

and when they do as Jesus commands, suddenly, 'half-empty' becomes 'half-full' and much more; scarcity becomes overflowing abundance; 'all ate and were filled', and there were even heaps of left-overs!

what does this story say about stewardship? here's a quotation from the *Giving in Grace* materials that we are using again this year:

'faced with the need of the crowd the disciples instinctively calculate the cost, they think in terms of financial transactions; our response to money demands can often be constrained by thinking only in terms of balancing a budget; again like the disciples there can be some mystification as to how the spiritual life could possibly address this need'

(there's that question again: how do we connect our money with our faith?)

'the miracle of the loaves invites us to see things differently; to shift from a pragmatic response to the needs of our churches, and to think more in terms of God's generous provision; this miracle challenges us to change our stewardship story from *scarcity* to *abundance*, from crisis to confident trust'

as you take your envelope today and peruse its contents, yes, do take in the figures, the costs for the coming year, and the need for about £450 a month *additional* stewardship giving to meet them; but don't rush to respond; take time to pray and think things through: should you join our Pledged Giving Scheme? can you increase your existing pledge? (the Church of England suggests at least 5% to the local church)

above all let our response not be a matter of anxious calculation, but flow from gratitude for all that God has blessed us with, and from a sense of abundance in our own lives

a final quote from *Giving in Grace*:

'mature stewardship is characterised by generosity because that which we give we have first received from God; that which we receive as both blessed and broken we are commanded to share'