

## St Mary's Holy Communion 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018

### Stewardship 2

**2 Corinthians 9:1-15**

**Luke 12:13-21**

Paul begins this new chapter of his letter to the Christians in Corinth, 'Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints' – but then he does it anyway!

I might begin today, 'there is no need for me to address you (again) on the subject of stewardship', but I'm going to do it anyway!

every year we hold a 'stewardship campaign' in the parish; there are letters to collect, forms to fill out, and sermons to write; though this year, you'll be relieved to know, it's gone down from three sermons to two! why do we keep doing it? why is it necessary?

there are simple, practical reasons: the church needs money, and no one is going to give that money except ourselves, its members; hence we need to talk about it, and ask you to consider what you can give

in your envelope is this colourful brochure, which sets out the situation we're in: the parish is running at a loss, and that can't be sustained for many years more; last year's stewardship campaign did lead to an increase in giving, but we also lost a lot of income, through people dying or moving away – we need more money

at the same time, costs are on the increase, principally to pay our clergy – that's for me and Shola, as we get Sue virtually for free! after years of being subsidised by the wider church, this parish is paying its way at last; but we don't want to fall back from that

so, the need is pressing, and I could make an emotional appeal calling on everyone to help out, lest the parish go bankrupt; but the passages from 2 Corinthians we have chosen for this year suggest a more spiritual, a more joyful approach to the question of giving

Paul wants these Christians to join in a collection for the impoverished church in Jerusalem; but he never talks about money directly; instead he uses two Greek words, *charis* and *eulogia*, that mean grace, gift, blessing – they are happy, positive words, not serious or glum!

Paul writes of their eagerness to make a gift, which he's boasted about to other churches; what he is looking for is not a grudging scraping of the barrel, 'well, I suppose, if you're that desperate, I could spare you a little', but a joyful obedience, in people who see a need and respond out of full, generous hearts: that's our focus today

as Maureen said last week: giving is being caught up in the flow of God's gracious giving to us; we give, because we have received so much ourselves: *charis & eulogia* – grace, gift and blessing

the opposite of these is *pleonexia*, which means greed and grasping; and that can work from both sides: the one asking for a donation can appear to be demanding a response

but Paul says, let your gift be 'voluntary, not an extortion (*pleonexia*)'; you should give 'not reluctantly or under compulsion – for God loves a cheerful giver'; the word cheerful there is the Greek word 'hilaros', from which we get 'hilarious': stewardship and giving should be such fun, such joy, for me, asking, as well as you, giving!

for there's also an aspect of pleonexia that operates from the other side – the giver, who clutches his money to himself, and reluctantly lets a few coins slip through his fingers  
this is what Jesus warns us against in the gospel reading, the Parable of the Rich Fool: 'Be on your guard', he says, 'against all kinds of greed (*pleonexia*); for life does not consist in the abundance of possessions'

the man of the parable is blessed abundantly, his land produces plentiful crops, but it is all for nothing because he holds on to it for himself; 'what shall I do? I'll build bigger barns, and I'll have enough to retire on and live at ease'; he has no idea of sharing it, or giving it away, and almost at once he finds he will lose it all: 'You fool!', says God, 'This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be then?'

'So it is', Jesus concludes, 'with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God'; let that not be us! however God has blessed us, it is not to be clutched at in fearfulness and anxiety, but held lightly, ready to be given away, shared, generously; generous people are happy people; misers are miserable!

in the same vein, Paul writes: 'The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully'; that's grace, blessing, *charis* and *eulogia* at work!

when we give – of our time, talents or money – we are sowing, we are investing in something, from which we then receive back; this is not Prosperity Gospel – 'give the church your money and you will become rich' – for what we get back is not more money but the spiritual blessing of seeing something good grow as a result of what we have sown

God has a way of multiplying what is given away: he gives his most precious thing, his own Son, to death on the cross; the result? thousands, millions, billions of new sons and daughters, those who have put their trust in Jesus and are called 'children of God'; God forgives our sins, so that we in turn may spread that forgiveness by being merciful to others: grace, gift, blessing are multiplied when given away!

a boy gives Jesus his packed lunch of five small loaves and two little fish, and sees them multiplied to feed 5000 and more; this is the opposite of the rich fool, who can only see blessing in hanging on to what he has, rather than in giving it away

how about us, when it comes to giving to the ministry of the church here in Langley? can we imagine our gift coming back to us in blessings, as we see the kingdom of God expressed and growing in our life together? or do we give reluctantly and under compulsion, wondering cynically, where does it all go, what is the point?

Paul calls us to give *from* an appreciation of the 'surpassing grace', the 'incredible gift' that God has showered upon us; and to give *for* the multiplication of blessings for our world, our church and ourselves

so he tells the Christians in Corinth to think ahead, to plan, to decide what to give; he doesn't want them to be scrabbling around for loose change when his envoys arrive to collect their offering

'I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to *go on ahead* to you, and arrange *in advance* for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be *ready* [when we come]'

so here in this parish we encourage everyone to think ahead, to make a pledge, what we intend to give over the coming year; this requires reflection and prayer, rather than making it up as we go along; we plan, we budget, rather than putting our spare change into the collection bag whenever we happen to be in church on a Sunday

of course that still leaves room for a sudden impulse of generosity, when you empty your wallet into the collection! but that should be on top of the regular, committed giving by standing order or envelopes

if you don't pledge yet, I urge you to do so; details of how to pledge are all in the envelope; and to those who already pledge, please review your giving!

here's the crunch: how much to give? that is, of course, between you and God, knowing how he has blessed you, and what you are called to offer; as a guideline the Church of England suggests we give a minimum of 5% of our income to the local church, and 5% to other causes; I know that there are people in our congregations who give well over that figure, but let's not leave it to them to keep the church running!

read the brochure and take on board the needs laid out there; ask, what is the priority of the church in our giving? is our giving realistic to sustain the ministry of the church to which we belong? do we give out of what we have left over at the end of a month, or do we plan ahead to give out of all that we have been blessed with?

the story goes that when mercenary soldiers were being baptised before going off to fight in the Crusades, they kept their sword arms out of the water – that part of them was not being baptised! perhaps that is our attitude to our wallets and bank accounts; we hold them out of the water and say, 'Lord, please not this as well!'

but if we are to enjoy fully the privileges and blessings of faith, it has to include what we do with our money; may we discover the joy of generosity, may we learn to give from grace and in grace, and so reap the blessings God promises