

Stewardship Sermon

21 October 2018

We've called today 'Stewardship Sunday'. So the first thing I want to say here, is a big thank you – thank you for all that you do, individually and collectively, to enable the ministry of God in Jesus Christ in this place, and thank you for the money you give to finance that mission and ministry here. Nothing could happen without both those gifts. Inevitably, this morning, I have to talk about money.

Some words of Archbishop Justin Welby just for you to keep in mind:

What we have, we value

What we measure, controls us

What we have, we hold

What we receive, we treat as ours

What we give, we gain

What we master, brings us joy

You may remember that we introduced the Parish Giving Scheme a few months ago. We made the packs available and a remarkable 27 people signed up to this new and efficient way of giving regularly to support the work and witness of this church. It's hard to overstate the benefits to us as a church this brings. It not only makes the collection of your offering so much less time-consuming, it also takes all the hard work out of calculating and claiming the gift-aid on your donations. Today we are rolling the Parish Giving Scheme out to everyone, whether you are part of the stewardship planned giving programme or not. If you are an existing member or on our electoral roll, there will be a pack with your name on it. Please make sure that you collect it before you go home today. The only people who won't have a pack are those who have already signed up. And even three of them will have packs, since you elected to remain anonymous. We're sorry about that, but we don't know who you are! If you are new to the church, or are not on the electoral roll, but are interested in joining the scheme, we do have some spare packs, so just ask.

How does it work? You set up a direct debit to the PGS which is based in the diocese of Gloucester. All our packs have our unique parish membership number, so PGS knows where to transfer the money. Your donation goes in on the first of the month, and we get it by the tenth. And if you are able to gift-aid your donation, then we get the gift aid by the fifteenth. It saves individual parishes so much time and effort in administration and guarantees our income. I say individual parishes, but in practice that means individual people and here it all falls on Godfrey Wilson who collects envelopes and records standing orders and staggers to the bank every week with cash that the banks will not always be willing to accept without charging us. Sign up now - save Godfrey's grey hairs and let him put his feet up occasionally!

I know that some people are nervous about direct debits. Are they safe? Will I keep control of how much I give? I understand these concerns, but I can assure you that payments to the Parish Giving Scheme are as secure, and as regulated, as any direct debit payments that you may already be making. Perhaps you pay your rent or your mortgage, your council tax, gas and electricity, your phone bill by direct debit. PGS is as regulated and secure as all of these. It uses the most up to date, state of the art, banking security programmes to protect our payments and our bank details. It could not be safer. If you wish, you can be

invited once a year to increase your giving by the rate of inflation. But you can choose not to be offered that option. And even if you choose to receive the notification, you can choose whether or not to increase your giving in any particular year. If you want to increase your giving, or reduce it, at any time, you can do that. You are in control of the amount of money you give. I was one of the first to sign up, and I commend it to you, unreservedly.

But why should we give anything at all? The church has plenty of money and our collection is just a token gesture. Well, I hope there aren't too many people here who actually think that! It's not the case of course and increasingly, parishes and churches, and teams need to become self-supporting in terms of finance. I think that the position of the Church of England as the national church has encouraged us to think that it's centrally funded, but it's not. Our brothers and sisters in the non-conformist and free churches around the town know that if they don't dig deep into their pockets to pay for the ministry they offer, then there will be no church. And some of them do raise some quite astonishing amounts of money through the sacrificial giving of often relatively small congregations.

A few years ago I had a conversation with a member of this congregation who has years of experience of running a high quality retail business, selling high-end shoes and leather goods. Some of you will know who that is, but I won't give their name. I was asked to explain to a business person, how church finance works. This is how I answered:

'It's as if you were to say "We sell the best shoes that you can buy. We think they're so wonderful that we want everyone to have them. And because we so want everyone to have them, we're not going to put a price on them. We're just going to say – pay what you think you can afford – pay what you can spare. In fact, because we so, so want everyone to have our wonderful shoes, we're going to say – you can have them even if you can't afford to pay anything at all! Just take them! That's how church finance works." My friend then said to me "I'd be out of business in a week!"

On the face of it, it's not a great business plan, but it's how the church goes about raising the money we need to make sure that there is a church not just for those who can afford to pay, but for everyone – not just for today, not just for our benefit, but for tomorrow.

The scriptures, the words of Jesus, encourage us to see our monetary offering as something that we give back to God in praise and gratitude for all that he freely gives us out of his love.

God's gifts begin with the gift of life itself, and the assurance of eternal life in his kingdom. He gives us the gift of love to share with one another – love through which we get a glimpse of what God's love is really like and what we could be like if we loved as God loves. God gave us himself in Jesus Christ, true God and true man – truly human, truly sharing in what it is to be human. Jesus gave himself completely – gave himself to us to the point of death, in order to show us what God's love really looked like. And through the death, and then the resurrection of Jesus, he gives us, freely gives, the gift of eternal life. He gave us baptism, through which that gift – that free gift – of God's grace is ours for ever. He gave us the sacrament of his body and blood, through which we are freely resourced and renewed in love and service. The free gifts of God go on, and on, and on. How can we respond? How must we respond? How can we not respond?

What can we give back to God?

To adapt, slightly, what I quoted from Justin Welby:

What we see, we value – yet our faith teaches us to value more than we can physically see;
What we measure, controls us – are we controlled by our wealth or by the generosity of God?
What we have, we hold – sometimes we hold on to it extremely tightly!
What we receive, we treat as ours – yet life and love are God's gifts, not ours by right;
What we give, we gain – Jesus shows us that love is revealed in sacrificial self-giving;
What we master, brings us joy – are we masters of our possessions, or do they master us?

People ask 'how much should I give'. The scriptural principle is a tithe, a tenth, of what we earn. Can we offer as much as that. Well economics is more complicated in the modern world. For many decades the church has recommended that we take our net annual income after tax, deduct what we pay in rent, mortgage, council tax, services and so on, and then give five per cent of the disposable income that's left. For what it's worth, that is how I have always calculated my own giving. I know that some here are much more generous than that. But even if you can't afford to give more, or to give at all, God's grace and the gift of salvation really are free.

Over the course of the year, we've done a lot of thinking and a lot of work on our long-term strategy. There are projects and activities there for which we need money. More recently, we're progressing plans for our new team ministry with Eynesbury and Loves Farm. Money will be needed for this too, and I've written about it already in the current issue of the Messenger, our parish magazine. There's a copy of that article in every pack.

Please take the packs home, read the letters we've enclosed and the material from the Parish Giving Scheme. If you have questions, don't be afraid to ask them. Phil Barrett will be available in the Church Rooms after this service to talk to anyone who is unsure, and you can contact me or one of the wardens at any time.

If you can, please do sign up to the scheme. Thank you for what you do and what you give already, and may God bless us all as we seek to model his kingdom and reach out with the love of Christ deeper into this community, always remembering that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.