

## **Deuteronomy 26**

### **Psalm 4**

### **2 Corinthians 9**

### **Matthew 21**

This is the third of three talks on the theme of stewardship; the theme of looking after what God has given us. In the first talk at the end of January I suggested that all our wealth comes from the earth or our own labours and that those both come from God. We are therefore responsible to God for how we use the earth he has given us and how we use the time he has given us.

In my second talk I suggested that that not only does each of us have a measure of time, but each one of us has different talents, different gifts and that we are responsible to God for how we use those gifts. And God wants us to take risks, to make the most of the gifts he has given us and to make an effort to identify not only our own gifts but those of other Christians who are members of this congregation.

Today I want to talk about the money – that amazing institution that allows us to exchange our time, our talents and the gifts of the earth for other peoples time, talents and gifts of the earth; and not only to exchange but also to give away.

Jesus' attitude to money can be summed up by saying that it is good – but dangerous.

In believing that wealth is good Jesus was firmly rooted in the Jewish tradition. We have already heard that expressed in Psalm 4. Jesus showed this attitude in the way that he lived. We often hear of him dining out, so much so that John the Baptist's disciples wanted to know why they had to fast but Jesus' disciples did not. (Matthew 9:14).

It is in his teaching that the darker, dangerous, addictive side of wealth is revealed. For example there is the farmer who has a series of unexpected good harvests. He has more grain than he knows what to do with so he pulls down his inadequate barns and builds new, bigger ones. Rather complacently he assumes that he is going to be comfortably off for many years. Unfortunately he dies that night. (Matthew 12:13-21)

Or then there is the rather chilling story of the rich man and Lazarus. They were neighbours on earth and in heaven. On earth the rich man never even noticed Lazarus begging at his gate. After death, when the rich man has gone to hell and Lazarus is in heaven the rich man suddenly notices Lazarus. But he sees him only as a potential servant, someone to give him a drink of water to take off the heat. He has no awareness of Lazarus as a fellow human being either on earth nor in heaven. His wealth has corrupted him.

Or then there is that rather earnest but wealthy young man who wants Jesus' advice on how he can inherit eternal life. Jesus gives him a rather conservative, safe answer: keep the commandments! The young man replies that he does! Jesus then takes a great risk:

There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.

The risk does not pay off. The young man does not take up Jesus' challenge prompting Luke's rather ironic comment:

But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.

There is something wrong with a man who is sad because he is rich. And this leads to Jesus famous response

it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Luke 18: 25

Paul wrote the same, albeit in more straightforward language, to his protégé, Timothy:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

1 Timothy 6:10

It is in this context that we need to see the practice of giving away our money. It is not only a matter of helping the poor – it is also, perhaps even primarily, a spiritual matter. It is about being sure that we sit lightly to our

material possessions. It is about our relationship with God. The Old Testament writers clearly saw it in that way. The author of Deuteronomy certainly saw that in his instructions about the first fruits and the tithe that we heard a few minutes ago. (Deuteronomy 26)

There are two characteristic themes running through that instruction. The first is that we give because God gave first. We are giving to others what has been given to us. That is emphasized throughout the Old Testament and all the more strongly after God rescues his people from slavery in Egypt.

The second theme is that what we give is the first fruits. We don't see to our own needs and then give away what is left; it is not the small change at the bottom of our pockets. It is very clearly the first item in the budget – giving back to God.

Jesus certainly saw charitable giving in this way. In the sermon in the mount he referred to it in the same breath as prayer and fasting. And he was very clear that generosity is not about the size of the donation: is about the size of the sacrifice. A million pounds from a multi-millionaire may make the front page news but it may be less generous than a couple of pounds from someone on the bread line. That's what the widow's mite is about. (Mark 12:42-44)

So giving is primarily a spiritual matter. The primary decision is to give to God; the secondary decision is about where we give in human terms.

But there is plenty of guidance in the bible about where we should give it. In the Old Testament it is always the widow, the orphan, the foreigner. The emphasis on the foreigner is quite striking in today's political climate.

In the New Testament it is much more about the mutual support of other Christian churches.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul writes with great enthusiasm about the generosity of the church in Macedonia. But he stress the mutuality of the support –

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your

need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.

2 Corinthians 8:8-15

That brings me inevitably to parish and diocesan finances. For the most part the Church of England has a very simple and reliable source of income: us. The ministry of the church across the whole of the country is sustained by the generosity and realism of the men and women in the pew. There is often great talk about the wealth of the church. And the Church of England does have significant investments. It is wealthy in the same way that those of us who have pension rights are wealthy. And the fact is that the fabulous wealth of the church generates an income just about enough to pay the pension of its retired clergy: the working clergy are funding by the giving of the present congregations.

Our own finances are set out in a simple booklet. Last year we spent £48,000. To put it another way that is £14 per week for every member of the electoral roll.

The first tenth was given away to other charities. Over half went to the Diocese to pay for me. Over a quarter went to keep this building going. And the good news is that we nearly gave enough to pay for it all. But only nearly. We were £4,000 short.

What can we do about that?

One possible approach is to cut our expenses. We could choose to have less clergy time. However in the past ten years the clergy time allocated to this parish has fallen from one to three quarters and now to half. We are reaping the benefit of that because if we had still had a full time priest we would have been paying the Diocese almost twice as much. It is not clear that more savings can be made here.

Nor can we do much about the building in the short term. In the long term we are working to make it available to the wider community which may in time make more funds available. But that is long term.

In the short term we need to increase our income.

Fund raising may play some part but not much. It is the smallest of our sources of income. To increase our income from fundraising would require it almost to double which would require double the time and effort. I do not believe that is possible.

The second most significant source of income is letting the hall. There is more potential here. It is not very labour intensive and there is undoubtedly capacity for significant increase.

But the greatest source in income is personal giving. It is both appropriate and realistic that this is where we will find the extra income. In round terms we need an immediate increase of 7%. Please consider that; and since some people will not be able to afford that please consider whether you can afford more.

And then there are some details of how we give. The ideal way of giving would be by standing order. There are two advantages here: first the church would know how much it was going to get. Second it would remove the need for the counting and backing of cash. I am immensely grateful on your behalf for all the work done by Brenda, Sally, Bob, Mercia and others in counting cash and then taking it to the bank. Wouldn't it be wonderful if one day they did not have to do that?

But even if you do not want to sign a standing order, please consider taking envelopes if you don't do so already. It is a way of budgeting and it helps the church council have some idea of what its income will be.

And finally if you pay tax but don't use the Gift Aid system please consider it. It is from our point of view, money for nothing. Whatever tax you have paid on your donation the Government returns to us. This year we expect that to amount to over £4,000.

It is a serious matter. But not a matter for gloom or reluctance but joy and generosity. Let me give the last word to St Paul:

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always

having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

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