

As I begin let us pray.

Today we are going to look at the Epistle from 2 Corinthians where Paul addresses the issue not of money but of giving, and there's a big difference. I wonder have you ever heard the story of the mother who on a Sunday morning said to her son as they went out the door to church, "Here is a pound son and here is a 10p. Whenever we get to church I want you to decide which one you think is appropriate to give as an offering to God". And so after the service was over she asked her son what he had decided. "Well", the little boy replied, "I was all ready with the pound in my hand to give it, but just before the offering came by, the man in the pulpit said we should be cheerful givers, so I knew I would be much more cheerful if I gave the 10p, so I did."

You will probably realise today that you don't often hear your rector speaking about money. It's not that I don't like speaking on it, but it's more that I see it as a response to worshipping God. It should never be a guilt trip or a something to bash people over the head about – it should instead be our outpouring, and our response to our love of God.

But giving is something we need to teach on from time to time. Jesus certainly did. Did you know that 16 of the 29 parables which Jesus spoke on were related in some way to money? If we were to equate that to sermons in a year it would account for 28 weeks talking about money. And I think the reason why Jesus spoke about it so much, was because he knew the true grip that it had on people, and continues to have on us today. Perhaps Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said, "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also" (Matthew 6:21). In other words, where is our value in life, because that will determine so much of our actions and commitment.

The Apostle Paul in our reading today is referring to 3 churches that he visited on his 2nd & 3rd missionary journeys from 49 – 57 AD. Paul was amazed by their generosity even though they were going through difficult times. Here's what he says in verse 2, "In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity". You see these churches were dealing with extreme poverty and had experienced 18 years of war, never mind the incredible tax burdens placed on them by the Roman Emperor Tiberius. And yet when these believers in these 3 churches heard about the dire situation of the Jerusalem Christians, they gave so generously even though they didn't have much themselves. Not only were they generous but they did it with joy. So what does Paul want to teach us today about this giving.

Firstly, Giving should be guided by grace. Paul talks here about the grace that God had given them. Paul wanted to highlight that our giving demonstrates our participation and our partnership with God in his Kingdom. In our Prayer Book actually within the Communion Service there are words that whilst they relate to the preparation of the table, they are sometimes used when the offering is collected and they say this, "Lord, yours is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty; for all things come from you and of your own we give you". These are words of scripture from 1 Chronicles in which we understand a God of grace who gives us all in order that we can then respond to his grace by using these

things for his glory. God gives us the means to give so that in our giving we might share his abundance and grace with others.

And so in God's amazing grace for us, he wants us to consider how we might share rather than keep. And therefore in my theology of a generous God, who before thinking of himself, humbled himself through his son, even to death on a cross, it shows that he put us first, before everything else. And so He has set us an example for our own way of living. He gives up everything in love, and in turn we are called to do the same. That's why Paul says here in verse 5, "They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us". You see how willing they were to go because of their understanding of how far the grace of God had taken him in humility for them.

These folks gave themselves first to the Lord – that was their priority in life. Paul goes on to point out they actually outdid themselves in their giving. They not only gave "according to their means", but they gave "beyond their means" he says. They dug deep because they understood the depths of grace. They understood that everything they had belonged to the Lord, and it therefore revealed their motives. The question for everyone of us today is this – how deep are we willing to dig in response to God's grace? Why do we actually give? You see there are a lot of reasons why people give, and God is very concerned with our motives for giving. It's striking that the first deaths recorded in the church occurred when a couple called Ananias and Sapphira decided that they would gain a reputation for giving that they did not really deserve. They pretended that they gave all but they really didn't. And God dealt with them severely.

There's no easy way of putting this folks, but all of us need to consider why and how we are sowing into the kingdom. It's not about paying the rector's salary – it's entirely about how much we love the Lord. The percentage of our giving to his mission will reflect how much we love him. Whilst this is uncomfortable to say, at present within our parish, of the 300 households that are officially registered with us, 1/3 (100 households) give nothing, and 22% give less than £5 per week. 7 households (which is 2% of our church) give £50 per week or more. Please hear my heart on this – it's not to feel the guilt – it's to help all of us recognise whether we, like the churches in Macedonia are making a sacrifice in our offering to the Lord's work.

As a church with whatever we receive we remain faithful to God as a Vestry every year by giving much outside of our walls. You see it's not a case that we preach to the congregation and don't do anything to model this ourselves. As a Vestry we understand the grace of God and our responsibility to joyfully bless others. In fact, under my guidance for the last 6 years the Select Vestry have given away 10% to ministries outside this church – it's called a tithe. Abraham in Genesis 14 offers up the tithe of all his wealth. Jacob in Genesis 28 declares that all he has been given by God, a 10th will be given back for God's use. The Mosaic Law underpinning everything of Israel's religion stated that 'all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord's: it is holy unto the Lord'. In these references it demonstrates that the tithe wasn't even the offering, it was a return of what already belonged to God. Now I don't want my treasurer to have a heart attack, but can you imagine if we as a church but also we as individuals in our

recognition of God's goodness gave a tithe, and then gave our offering, can you imagine under the Godly stewardship what could be done to bless others.

Also it's important that I am fully transparent, and I'm not willing to preach such things without first of all being in the spotlight. Throughout mine and Alison's life, we have exercised tithing, whether we have little money or a lot of money. Does that all go to this church – no, although the majority does, and then the remainder goes to other Christian ministries that build God's Kingdom (not organisations that simply do charitable work). And all along we have found that whilst from an accountancy perspective it makes no sense to give so much away, we have always found that we receive more blessing than we have given. That is the currency of the Kingdom of God.

So that's the first point - we give because we have experienced God's grace in receiving. Being moved by the abundance of blessing causes us to give in response to the grace shown to us. Our giving blesses others, and they receive a measure of God's grace, and we then are able to see what God can do for others through the ministry he calls the Church to be here on earth.

Secondly, in verse 12 Paul states that our giving is acceptable based upon what one has, not according to what one doesn't have. In other words God accepts our offering when it is based on what we have rather than on what we give him after we think of our own need.

When we think of giving a proper offering one word that may be hard to consider is whether it feels like a sacrifice? Sacrifice is a word that throughout the Bible speaks of God's presence showing up when his people placed a worthy sacrifice of their worship to him. God shows up when his people demonstrate how much they value him as Ruler and Lord, before they think of their own need. So what would a sacrifice be to you and me today in our context?

Remember the time when Jesus and his disciples were sitting outside the Temple watching the folks passing by to drop their collections in the box. As Mark tells the story, many rich people gave large sums of money. Then a poor widow came by and dropped in what would be the modern equivalent of a couple of pennies. Jesus said to his disciples, "This poor woman has put in more than all the rest have given. They gave out of their abundance, but she has given everything she had." And folks that's where I think we have completely misunderstood the issue of giving within the Church. The point is whether we as a Church and as individuals are making a sacrifice. Financially as a church in the last 4 years we have found times pretty tough as we have dipped in reserves, but has that truly been a sacrifice? You see if I was to challenge our new Vestry in this coming year that we're not going to just stop at a 10th, but actually we are going to increase our tithe because we want to honour the Lord, I suspect that there would be a sharp intake of breath, but when does our giving feel like the sacrifice that this poor woman obviously is willing to go to? And similarly as individuals do we feel the strain of giving over what we hold so precious to? Is what we give a sacrifice to us? Does it feel like a sacrifice or is it actually relatively easy? Because if it's easy then it clearly isn't a sacrifice. We can budget for how much we are going to give back to God's work each week. We can appear to give a large sum and feel good about it, but the context of Jesus' observations with the widow was that

those religious folk who kept trying to justify their giving to the temple were considered by Jesus as the ones who would receive the greater condemnation". Why? Because it actually didn't feel like a sacrifice to them. Does our giving feel like a sacrifice?

The sacrifice we make in our giving demonstrates where our security really lies. Giving grows our trust for God. It is an exercise in spiritual growth, and our giving should flow out of all that we have, not what we feel happy to give. So is what we give an indication of what we are happy to give or is it an indication of how willing we are to rely upon God?

And this is not only a principle that each of us needs to consider, but it is also a principle that those entrusted with stewardship in our churches i.e. Select Vestries need to consider also. Because it makes no sense at all if we as people following God's call for sacrifice are then passing it on to others who consider that they now can spend it on our behalf. No, in fact those that have the stewardship of our gifts should firstly then consider how it can be given to those who through their commitment to prayer are on God's heart. That's why Paul talks about the balance to ensure that we only have what we need and nothing more.

To conclude, all of this really doesn't begin with the issue of money. All of this begins with our walk with God, and what our relationship with God is like. The widow who had little, understood more than any respectable religious figure, that her worth was in Christ, and therefore everything she had was placed before him as a sacrificial offering of her worship to him. When we consider our own giving to God's service, does it say something about our relationship with him, does it reflect our lack of understanding of the abundant love and grace that he lavishes over us daily, does it reflect on the sacrifice we are willing to make for his service? Paul brought this message as an encouragement to the Church so that God may be honoured. May we all reconsider whether God is honoured and glorified by our generosity.