

GENEROUS GIVING

(Proverbs 22.9 and Matthew 25.31-40)

Today is the last of our short series of 3 sermons about giving. And it's not possible entirely to separate the themes of sacrificial giving, tithing and generosity, because they are intertwined like the strands in a rope. So I make no apology if there is some overlap with what you have heard before. But being last does give me the opportunity to sum up!

But I'm not going to start with giving at all. I'm going to start with God. Because the God we worship has been amazingly generous to us. He's given us an amazing world to live in, well provided with places to live, with food and drink, with materials to use for clothing and shelter and making tools. A wonderful world of which we have proved unworthy in our selfishness and greed.

And in our unworthiness, he has even sent Jesus at great cost to save us from our sin, and grant us eternal life. Eternal life which we could never earn for ourselves. How generous is that? Generous to a fault, though that's really a contradiction.

So how should we respond to that generosity? Well, we are free to choose. We can respond with amazing generosity ourselves, we too can be generous to a fault. Or we can just take God's generosity for granted, and be mean with what we have. It's our choice. *[When he was quite small, Janet's cousin Ian piped up in church "I don't want to spend my three-pence in church Mummy, I want to spend it in Woolworths"]*. We can give our three-pence to God, or we can spend it at Woolworths (but not literally anymore). Just as usually we can tip at a restaurant or not, as we choose.

But our choice has consequences. Our reading from Proverbs (the shortest on record, did anyone miss it?) makes it clear that generosity is the way of blessing. And in our gospel reading, the generous, the sheep, are blessed by God. Holding on to money and possessions when we should be generous hinders our relationship with a loving and generous God. And holding on to money and possessions when we should be generous means carrying a burden when we could be travelling light. *[Two sisters I knew well were as different as two sisters could be. One was very generous, the other was really rather mean. The generous one was liberated by her generosity – she was never burdened by what she had. But her rather meaner sister spent a lot of her time worrying about money and possessions, and was always justifying her meanness to herself and to others, her money, particularly was a burden to her]*.

Now there are many ways we can be generous; with our possessions, our time, our labour or our emotions. But for many of us, the greatest challenge is to be generous

with our money. It has been said that the last thing we surrender to Jesus is often our cheque book. Particularly when it comes to giving to the church.

And we can be experts in coming up with all sorts of excuses. Like the church is actually rich, and doesn't need our money. Not true, particularly in Durham Diocese, where we need a 5% year on year increase in giving to reverse the decline in ministry over recent decades. Excuses like, well those people in Durham will waste it on administration. Not true, nearly all of our giving goes on paying parish clergy and their pensions. Excuses like, well they will spend it on clergy with different theologies. Well yes, but one of the strengths of the Church of England is that it's a broad church. And no clergy is an even worse outcome.

So let's not be put off by excuses. Let's not allow a generous response to God's generosity to be blunted. Let's not miss out on the blessing that generosity brings.

So let's sum up what we have learned about giving, especially giving to the church, over the last three weeks.

1. We will be blessed if our giving is sacrificial. That means it's the first priority when we plan our spending, not what we have left over at the end. It could mean postponing a new kitchen or a new car. It's a challenge to the depth of our discipleship.

2. We will be blessed if our giving is proportionate to our income. That's what tithing is all about. It's not like the subscription to a club, the better off give more. How much is up to us. Jesus said "I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it". The tenth is a good benchmark, but John Wesley lived simply and as he became richer gave all the rest away, way, way above 10%. Wesley was generous to a fault.

And as an aside, it's good to be efficient in our generous giving, paying by bankers order so it is regular, and making use of gift aid if we are taxpayers.

3. But above all, we will be blessed if our giving is generous, if we are generous to a fault. Blessed if our generous giving is a joyful expression of our response to God's generosity. Blessed if we spend our three pence in church and not at Woolworths. Blessed if we worship with our chequebooks and not just our voices.

Because generous giving is the way of blessing, and the only appropriate response to a God who's been so generous to each of us.