

SACRIFICIAL GIVING

(Deuteronomy 14.28-29 and Mark 12.38-44)

In 1979 the police in Rome uncovered a remarkable crime. Father Guido Antonelli, a humble parish priest, was discovered in the crypt of his church printing 1,000 lire banknotes! In his defence, he pleaded that he had to resort to forgery because his parishioners weren't putting enough in the plate at Mass! I hasten to add that we have no plans to take such a creative approach to the finances here.

Well, today's talk is the first in a series of three on the subject of giving and I'm going to speak primarily about financial giving today, though I will touch on other aspects of generosity as well.

We have all heard that money can't buy happiness and every comic has had their bit to say on the subject; Spike Milligan put it this way; "Money can't buy happiness, but it can get you a more pleasant form of misery!" Bo Derek gave another perspective on the issue when she said, "Whoever said money can't buy happiness simply didn't know where to go shopping!"

But the Apostle Paul in the Bible was able to say, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation."

And in the letter to the Hebrews it says to enjoy what you do have instead of dwelling on what you don't have. "Keep your lives free from the love of money" it says, "and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"

One of the ways to be free from the love of money is to give more of it away. The people of Israel, from the time of Moses onwards, had to give a tithe, that is to say 10% of their income.

Brian will speak in detail about this next Sunday but I'll just say a few words on it today as it's what our first reading in Deuteronomy 14 is about.

It was a compulsory tax and it was levied for three reasons;

- firstly to celebrate the abundance of God's provision;
- secondly, to give an income to the Levites who were the clergy if you like and had no other way of earning a living;
- thirdly, to assist those who had fallen on hard times; in particular, migrants arriving destitute from other countries, as well as orphans and widows who had no one to provide for them.

These tithes and offerings funded the world's very first welfare state. Everyone who worked had to give 10% of their wages so that everyone who couldn't work would not starve or have to beg. And the Bible says this; the people were to provide in this way "so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."

But our theme today is not just generous giving, it's *sacrificial* giving: that is to say, intentionally offering something that is precious, costly or barely affordable as an act of worship and devotion to God.

Sacrificial giving may be seen more in times of scarcity than in times plenty. Sacrificial giving can involve giving my time, my talents, as well as my treasure. Sacrificial giving can mean surrendering something I love dearly; it may be to give up my dreams, or even my life. Sacrificial giving is often marked by acts of apparent recklessness.

Dennis Bakke is a successful American businessman, and a Christian believer, who puts well over 95% of his salary into a trust called the Mustard Seed Foundation to support church growth and humanitarian relief projects around the world. Some might say, "Well it's alright for him, he can afford it." Maybe he can, but how many people on his income would live in a modest two-bedroom house and drive a second hand Ford like he does?

At the other end of the earning scale, a friend of mine, when she was a student in Paris, felt that she should put all her last banknotes in the offering one Sunday, knowing that she would have *nothing* – and I mean nothing but a few groceries at home - to live on for the next ten days. She thought, "I'm only young once. This will be exciting. Let's see what God does now." The following evening she arrived home to find an unexpected cheque in the post for the same amount she had given away.

Research done a few years ago revealed that, in evangelical churches, 20% of the people cover 80% of the budget. 30% of the people pay for the rest and 50% give nothing.

Lewis tells me that in 2013 at Saint Mary's 70% of the people did 80% of the giving which is a lot healthier. The remaining 30% of the people covered all the rest of the giving. So no-one gave nothing.

But 40% of our giving comes from 7% of the people at Saint Mary's which would leave us in a precarious position if they were to move on. I don't know who they are as, to avoid favouritism, I make it a point of principle to not have access to information about who gives what.

Our gospel reading from Mark 12 contrasts two very different attitudes.

Firstly, the teachers of the law, or scribes, in v38-40 where Jesus speaks severely and disturbingly about being religious for what you can get out of it.

Watch out, says Jesus, for religious people who love prestige. The scribes liked to wear long robes. Why was that? Because you can't do manual work in them or move about quickly in them. They were the attire of a life of ease.

They liked the deference of special greetings as well. From Matthew's gospel we know they liked to be called "Father" and "Master." Why? Because those titles imply a status above others. "Don't confer those titles," Jesus said, "because you're all equal and only God is above you all." Religion loves to give titles like "Father", Padre (which means father), Pope, (which also means father) and Most Reverend Lord Bishop. What's the matter with us? Jesus said, "Don't do that." It's not a particularly difficult teaching to obey and yet it's everywhere in the Church.

They loved status symbols; they wanted the best places where they could be seen and esteemed by people. Their handbook called *the Mishnah* states that they expected people to stand as they passed by. Jesus said to beware that kind of religious celebrity culture and avoid it.

Apart from a few Temple-based teachers of the law, most scribes were forbidden from being paid so people were encouraged to show respect their learning by offering them hospitality. But it seems they took advantage of this and sponged off vulnerable people with limited means. They ate widows out of house and home, impressing them with their false piety. That is what Jesus criticises here when he says, "They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers."



Secondly, the poor widow. At the temple treasury there was a large trumpet shaped funnel over the money box at the gate and people lined up to throw their money in to it. It made a ringing sound as the coins went in so the bigger the sum, the louder the ring. How did Jesus know that the widow only put two mites in? Because it would have only made two small distinctive pings as it went into the trumpet.

But how much did she give? "Everything she had to live on", says Jesus, who commended her for it. All the others gave from what they had left over. She kept absolutely nothing back. He didn't say, "How stupid! How irresponsible! How is she going to pay the rent now?"

C. S. Lewis wrote: "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare."

When Jesus looks at the collection he doesn't ask "What can this buy?" He asks "What did it cost?" How much was left in the wallet and the purse?

Kathie and I know a couple who are planting a secret house church in the Muslim world. I'll call them Marie and Hassan. One day, they needed a sudden cash injection of \$1,000 for their ministry. So they contacted some Christian friends in the USA, Bill and Sue, asking them to consider loaning them that sum.

The reply was "Yes," but it came with a condition. The condition was that they would not pay the money back when they had the means to do so but instead pass it on to someone else who needed it, stipulating the same condition; that the money be moved on somewhere else in the kingdom of God instead of reimbursed.

A few months later, Hassan received an unexpected productivity bonus from the bank he worked for. When he calculated the exchange value from local currency it came to... \$1,000.

So they passed on that money to someone else in need, who in turn blessed someone else when they had the means to do so, and so it went on. The gift kept on bringing blessing as God multiplied the spirit of generosity in his people with overflowing blessing and many surprises.

God's economy does not work like the world's. The world's economy booms and then busts in cycles that usually last about 12 years. The world's economy is affected by interest rates and fiscal policy.

The boom and bust of God's economy is expansion through faith and love, and contraction through unbelief and selfishness. You stimulate growth in God's economy through joyful trust in God's provision and sacrificial generosity.

What might God do if every person here would seek ways of sacrificial giving?

Let's be ambitious in asking God to pour out a spirit of grace and sacrificial generosity upon us at Saint Mary's.'

"It is better to give than to receive" said Jesus. "It's *better*" said the one who gave absolutely everything, pouring himself out in the greatest sacrifice of all, which we celebrate once again this morning as guests at his table.

Let's pray...

