

TITHING

(Genesis 28.20-27 and 2 Corinthians 9.6-11)

Tithing!

One day at church a little boy, dressed in his Sunday best, took off his tie and put it in the offering plate. *What are you doing?* asked his mother. Came the answer: *The vicar told us to give our ties and offerings.*

Tithing! Let's get one thing out of the way immediately. Don't get hung up on the word which is the title of this talk – *tithing*. Tithe is just the very old English word for *tenth*. We don't talk about *tenthing* when we mean giving a tenth part. Modern English has no verb from the word *tenth* so we fall back on using *tithing*. Right – let's move on!

Jacob is on the run from his brother, Esau. Esau who has sworn to kill Jacob because Jacob had tricked his blind father, Isaac, into making him his heir instead of Esau even though Esau was the elder of the two. The fugitive Jacob is on his way to his uncle Laban at a place called Haran until the dust settles. He travels for a day and decides to settle down for the night using a stone for a pillow. During the night he has a remarkable dream. He sees a staircase linking earth with heaven. Constantly moving up and down that staircase are angels and at the top is God himself. God identifies himself as the Lord God of Abraham and Isaac and promises Jacob three things:

1. That Jacob and his descendants will own the land part of which he is lying on.
2. That his descendants will be many and will be a blessing to the earth.
3. That he, God will watch over, Jacob wherever he goes.

Then occurs the passage which David read to us. In awe of what he has seen and heard, Jacob takes the stone he has used as a pillow, puts it on top of an upright rock and anoints it with oil. As a response to God's promises, he then, in turn, makes the promise to God which formed that first reading. He promises two things

1. That the stone he has set up as an altar will mark the site of God's house.
2. That he will give back to God a tenth of what God gives him.

Given the spectacular nature of his dream it is hardly surprising that Jacob wants to mark where it happened with something very special – a special place for the God who has promised so much to him. Bethel means *House of God* and became one of the places where the ark was sited.

But why the promise about the tenth? Well, just think about what had happened. Jacob was a refugee (that word rings bells right now doesn't it?). What will happen to him? Is Esau close behind him? Will the plan to stay for the time being with his uncle work? Will Esau ever calm down and abandon his plan to kill Jacob? A worried man on the run. Then he has that wonderful experience of God, talking to him and making that oh, so welcome promise that he, God, will always look after him.

How could he respond to such a caring and generous God? *Of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.* That was his response. Why a tenth? Because that had become the rule and custom. In Leviticus 27, Numbers 18, Deuteronomy 14 (read to us last week), 2 Chronicles 31 you will find references to tithing. In Matthew 23.23 Jesus chastises the Pharisees because they dutifully give a tenth of their spices but neglect justice mercy and faithfulness. And, as John told us last week, from Moses onwards, tithing was obligatory for Jews in order to maintain their priesthood.

It even carried over to England. There was a time when tithes were paid in one form or another to help maintain parish churches and priests. They became a form of tax and were only finally abolished in 1936.

Enough about history. What about now?

Someone once said *The trouble is that there's always too much month at the end of our money.* Another wisecrack is: *Money isn't everything. Sometimes it's not even enough.* John D Rockefeller (when he was the world's richest man) once said this: *How many millions does it take to satisfy a man? The next one!* And another crack - *Just about the time you think you can make both ends meet, somebody moves the ends.*

There are almost as many jokes about money than there are about lawyers. We could go on and on with them but what does St. Paul say about God and giving? We heard it in our second reading: *Each one should give what they*

have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. So there has to be a decision – this is not something casual, this is commitment.

Martina Navratilova, the great tennis player said:

*I was asked if I was still involved in tennis. I replied, 'I have never been involved in tennis. I'm **committed** to tennis'. It's the difference between the hen and the pig in eggs and bacon. The hen is involved, the pig is committed.*

If we are committed to God and his work we have to be serious about how we reach the decision that Paul talks about. He tells us that we are not to give reluctantly but cheerfully. If we are committed to God then he must come first – first in our lives and first in our giving - so there is a good way in which we can each of us decide what to give. It's this. When we plan our spending, don't finish with God; start with God.

I have two quotations for you.

Quotation No. 1: *No-one would have remembered the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions. He had money as well.* Do you know who said that? I'll tell you in a minute.

Quotation No 2: *Pennies do not come from heaven – they have to be earned here on earth.* Do you know who said that?

The first was said by Margaret Thatcher. Was she right? Yes, but only half right – she missed out the motivation of the Good Samaritan. He was using his money in the service of God. He saw another of God's children in need and responded to that need – largely in cash. And if you remember the story he paid the innkeeper cash up front and undertook to pay any extra that became due.

What about *Pennies do not come from heaven – they have to be earned here on earth* – who do you think said that? Margaret Thatcher again! Was she right this time? Absolutely not! Why? Because she failed to acknowledge that everything we have comes from God. We say that sometimes, don't we, at the offertory – *All things come from you and it is your own that we give you.*

So how does the idea of tithing help us? Well let's be clear about one thing. There is no rule that says we must tithe but if in our financial planning we are

going to start with God the idea of tithing might help. Let's look at some practical bits and pieces.

If we decide to tithe in the traditional sense of giving a tenth of our income – the Jacob system if you like - and if we accept as Christians that what we have stems from God's goodness then we would decide that whether our money comes in weekly or monthly or even on a yearly basis, a tenth of what comes in will go to God and his work in one way or another.

A variant on this is to give one tenth, not of gross income but of income after tax. We have no option but to pay tax so in this system we are giving to God and his work one tenth of our disposable income.

I have used the expression *giving to God and his work* deliberately because, although we may choose to tithe to St. Mary's to support all that goes on here and to enable more to be done and through St. Mary's give to God's work elsewhere both overseas and here in Great Britain, we might choose to give part to St. Mary's and part direct to charities and other causes which we know are part of God's work of love in his world.

Now there will be some of you who will have a practical problem about tithing. If you are a Christian and look to tithe but your partner is not, how do you deal with that situation? It would be OK if each of you were earning roughly the same but if not? I guess it's a matter for discussion but one solution would be to decide on a fifth of the household income.

One difference between our two readings this morning is the obvious one – Jacob promises to tithe but Paul talks of meanness in sowing producing a pretty pathetic reaping and generous sowing producing a big result. But there is another contrast – both about promises. In the Jacob story, the decision to give to God a tenth of what Jacob gets is a thankful response to the greatness and awesomeness of God and God's promise to him. In the Corinthians passage it is the other way round – that decision about giving (about sowing generously) is promised to result in us – What are Paul's words? - *abounding in good work and enlarging the harvest of our righteousness*.

The two passages are complimentary – because God is a great and loving God and gives us so much, we are committed to him in all things in

thankfulness and praise. You may have noticed that the hymns this morning are on that theme. That thankfulness and praise are reflected in our decisions about financial giving which in turn result in unbounded grace from our Father to enable us to do his will and increase the harvest of our righteousness. It's a virtuous circle!

Let's finally look back at the Jacob story. God, in his grace and generosity, promises he will always look after Jacob and his descendants. If we bring that promise forward into the New Testament, what might Jesus have said – perhaps something like this: My Father loves each of you dearly, will always give you what you need, and will look after you – even to the extent of allowing me to die to save you.

If that is true – and I am sure it is – can we hold back, in overwhelming gratitude, from giving back to God and his work here on earth a significant proportion of our income and perhaps tithing might be the right way to do it!

Let's pray now in the slightly adapted words of John Pritchard, who was the Bishop of Jarrow before he moved to be Bishop of Oxford:

Generous God, you give us so much. Every breath is a gift, every sight, sound and touch; every friend and loved one. Teach us how to respond to such abundance with love and imagination and to share your generosity with a needy world through the extravagant love of Jesus Christ, our Lord.