



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity Stewardship Sunday

readings: [Habakkuk 1.1-4, 2.1-4](#), [2 Timothy 1.1-14](#), [Luke 17.5-10](#)

2 October 2022

And so, we come to the end of Generosity week. Last week was our Harvest Festival. We were reminded by Alan that God in Christ redeems an unfair world, its inequalities, and its unjust distribution of resources. The future of creation is in our hands following the example of Jesus.

This week we have been hosting thousands of people who have come to visit Derby Cathedral and engage with Gaia and all that the experience of seeing a 7-metre diameter globe in our midst sparks off. I will never forget the experience of hearing Genesis chapter 1 read under Gaia at evensong last Sunday. Words and image straining to do justice to the beauty, the magnificence, the power of God's creation. God's gift of creation bursting out of the confines of language and the artwork; words and images getting us only so far; drawing us towards all that remains unsaid and unseen.

Over these few weeks we are sharing this Cathedral Church with the thousands who will come to see Gaia: some glimpsing our worship, many taking part in it, all recognising that this is a holy place that speaks of God. This is Derby Cathedral acting as a generous community; looking outwards, opening its doors; sharing the resources that God has lavished upon us with the communities of Derby and Derbyshire and well beyond.

And why do we do this? What is it that deep inside us motivates our generosity in sharing our time, our gifts and skills, our very being with others? It's St Paul who locates the well-spring of our generosity in the gift – the undeserved, unmerited, freely offered – gift of Christ. The gift was given to us at the very beginning but revealed to us in the appearing of our Saviour Jesus. The gift of light and beauty, of love and salvation – an abundance, pour out, overflowing on human beings.

Paul urges us to 'rekindle the gift of God that is within us'. Each time we offer ourselves in response to God's abundance, we rekindle the gift of Christ our hearts. God's Spirit lifts our hearts as we offer back to God all that he gives to us. Our hearts leap, our Christian faith is renewed, we appreciate how much more there is to grasp. Giving back to God is an essential part of who we are.

It is our goal to be a generous community and we live out that goal together. Year on year, Stewardship Sunday is going to be that moment where we give ourselves opportunity to focus on this aspect of our lives. A Sunday to understand how each of us might contribute to the life of God's people in this place, a generous people, including how we steward our finances.

It's not always easy to speak about money from the pulpit because sometimes the discussion is wrongly focused on 'how much'?

Historically, tithing has been a Christian principle, giving a tenth of one's income away. This is a principle that runs deep in the Old Testament - think of Abraham tithing his possessions to Melchizedek in tribute; think of Jacob who after his encounter with God says, 'and of all that you give to me, I will surely give one tenth to you'.

But we live under grace and not under law and so tithing has always been interpreted. In some church traditions, a guideline was 5% of our income to the church and the rest to good causes and charities.

I don't want to undermine tithing – far from it – but we need to notice that in the very early church as the Apostles and the first disciples gathered as a community in Jerusalem the emphasis changed. Possessions – houses and fields - were sold and the income given to the poor. Material possessions were held in common. Nothing was to be held back, as the story of Ananias and Sapphira illustrates only too clearly. Such was the power of the resurrection and the presence of the risen Jesus in their midst that followers of Christ gave all that they had. Tithing was a starting point to consider how to respond not a hard and fast rule.

What we see in the New Testament is the development of a different practice of giving. Not a community that stuck to a set of rules, but a community that had a deep sense of the sort of people they were called by God to be – a generous community, a people living out lives marked by a generous approach to each other, to the poor, to the church and to the world.

It meant providing food and social care and money to the weak and vulnerable; it meant establishing a common fund so that those who did the work of the church could be supported; it meant the offering of time, of skills; it meant making yourself available for the ministry of the church in any way the church discerned. It meant the churches in Greece and Asia contributing to a collection for the Church of Jerusalem when it ran into hardship.

Giving generously and financially is part of the mix in offering our life in deep gratitude to the gift of God revealed in Christ. But it is more than that: it is about keeping our relationship with God alive and fresh; it is about the mystery of God working within us and amongst us, cooperating with God's plan and purpose for our lives.

A generous community is one in which everyone takes part. It is one in which the genuineness of the offer counts; it is one in which the small contribution is valued and makes the difference. It's a community where what matters is not *how much* but whether everyone contributes. A community where everyone takes part, and everyone's contribution makes a difference.

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk spoke out in a time where it was not obvious that God was at work in his people. The word of God spoken through the prophet reassures that God's vision for his people is alive and worth waiting for; it's a vision of a people animated by a lively faith shaping their attitudes, behaviours, and dispositions.

The Chapter, the canons, I as Dean have a common vision of a Cathedral where everyone takes part in building our future. Our vision is for a Cathedral community with lively faith at its heart, a faith that is renewed moment by moment by the gift of Christ at work in our lives, renewed as we seek to act generously towards each other and to the world.

Afterwards please come over to the Cathedral Centre and we would like to give you an update on the difficult and challenging situation we face with the Cathedral's finances. We will set out the vision that we have for an inclusive people of God, each one of us playing our part in offering our gifts and especially our financial gifts. This is a different presentation to the one we usually give at the AGM. Please come and explore the vision and the response we can all make.

The smallest amount of faith can work wonders, says Jesus in St Luke's Gospel. Faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, can move mountains. The smallest gesture can make a big difference. It's like the 'butterfly effect' known to ecologists and climatologists. The idea is that a butterfly, released from between our hands, flapping its wings, can have a major impact on the complex interconnected systems that make up our world. A butterfly flapping its wings in one hemisphere can cause a giant storm in the other. It's nowhere near as simple as that of course but small systems theory tells that seemingly insignificant events can be catalysts for other events that in turn catalyse others, that in their turn lead to great things happening.

It's like that with our giving. One gift, no matter how small or large only makes a difference when it takes its place amongst all other gifts. Our financial giving only makes the intended impact if it takes its place as part of the giving of ourselves – our money, yes, but also our time, our talents, our gifts and skills to God's

community and its mission. God invites us, each one of us, to take part in God's community of generosity. A small gift's impact is beyond our imagining. Remember the butterfly effect. Not only is it in our hands to make a difference, but the promise of Jesus is that the effect of the smallest act of faith is out of all proportion to its size.

It might be the end of generosity week for this year, but it's a beginning for us on our journey of Stewardship. May the generous God continue to reach out to us, even as we reach out to him in generosity and love. Amen.

**The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson
Dean of Derby**