



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Stewardship Sunday

Readings: [Job 1.1; 2.1-10](#), [Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12](#), [Mark 10.2-16](#)

6 October 2024

The New Testament reading from Hebrews frames our Stewardship Sunday. The writer sets out the Christian vision. Initiative, gift, and generosity. The initiative of God, the gift of God and the generosity of God.

It all centres around Christ. Through him all things were created. God, moved by his generosity and with a desire to give takes the initiative in creation and redemption. God is the pioneer who opens up the space of creation as an act of sheer gift: God does not need to create but does so out of his love that can only offer gift. God is the pioneer who goes ahead, forges salvation and offers his overwhelming love to all his creatures, simply because he wills the flourishing of every part of his creation. At the heart of the Christian vision is Christ, God in human form, suffering in death, risen, now crowned in glory and living amongst us.

This vision offered hope to the first century Christians. We don't know for sure but if we imagine Hebrews being written in the great city of Ephesus and received by Christians in Corinth the most important Roman colony of the time and before they received the letters of the Apostle Paul, we won't go too far wrong. This message resonated in the cities of a fractured and contested ancient world.

In our turbulent world of darkness and despair the vision of Christ set out in Hebrews offers us hope. Tomorrow, we mark the first anniversary of the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and the outbreak of war in Gaza, and the tragedy of all that has happened since. At the same time, we find it difficult understand how the Russian invasion of Ukraine will end and continue to mourn with the displaced peoples of Sudan in the grip of civil war.

The world is offered the hope found in God's initiative, gift and generosity towards human beings. It is this hope that sets the scene for us as we reflect on how we steward our resources for the sake of God's kingdom.

On Friday afternoon as we were preparing for choral evensong with the Junior Choir, someone who had walked through the cathedral doors wishing to find a quiet space, noticed the preparations for the service and asked, 'do I need to pay to attend the service?' 'No', of course I replied quickly, 'it's free'.

Well yes and no! We don't charge for entry; we certainly don't require an entrance fee for a service of choral evensong, but every act of worship has a cost to it. Churches, Cathedrals cost money. It costs to keep the cathedral open for 364 days a year, from 8am and often until late. Our expenditure is nearly one million pounds per annum to enable this wonderful and remarkable building to be an attractive place of prayer, music, learning, partnership, heritage, art, and culture for the people of Derbyshire and Derby and for the thousands who visit us. It's over £2,500 per day to enable the communities of Derby Cathedral to flourish and to serve the bishop and diocese of Derby as a centre for worship and mission.

It's vital that our Cathedral is a well maintained one, safe, warm to enter, welcoming and embracing of all who cross our threshold. Our vision is to attract the people of the Diocese, the County, and the region to experience the gift of this building – its light and its beauty – and the gift of this community – sanctuary and innovation. Building and community working together to create a compelling vision of the God who is generous in giving gifts and who always make the first move in reaching out to his creation.

Stewardship Sunday is a space where we are able to focus on our goal to be a generous community. It's an opportunity to grasp how each of us might contribute to the life of God's people in our place and time, responding to God's love by offering our gifts - personal and material, time and money, talents and abilities.

The apostle Paul says, 'God loves a cheerful giver' and in one translation 'God loves those who love to give.' The one who gives is imitating the very nature and character of God.

There is never a good time to speak about money. Today we are only too aware of the pressures we all face. There are concerns about tax rises in the autumn budget, a fear that lower interest rates are on the way: will inflation now rise because of wars in the Middle East?

The bible is not silent on money. It's often noted that there are over two thousand verses across the Old and New Testaments that speak of our use of money of possessions – far more than speak of prayer or matters to do with faith. Archbishop Michael Ramsey famously said that Christianity is 'the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions'. What he meant was that in Christianity materiality is a key sign of the kingdom of God. How we steward our resources, how we spend our money says so much about how we see God and respond to him.

Historically, tithing has been a Christian principle - giving a tenth of one's income away. This is a principle that runs deep in the scriptures - think of Abraham tithing his possessions in tribute to Melchizedek; 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 of the importance of guidelines for giving - far from it – but in the very early church as the first Christians 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. Such was the power of the Resurrection 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 God's initiative in love reaching out to them, enabling them to be sort of people they were called by God to be – a generous community, a people offering gifts back to God out of all God had first given to them – enabling the work of the church's mission.

Imitating God's character meant providing resources 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 the gifts we have received 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.

Margaret Silf, the Christian spiritual writer, tells the story of the gifts department in heaven. The angels were tidying the department up and there was a lot to do. First, there was a whole pile of gifts that the Great Giver had offered to human beings, but which had been returned unopened after the recipient's death. 'What a shame', the angels said, 'and after the Great Giver chose them so carefully and personally and packaged each one with love'.

A second pile then caught the angels' attention – gifts that had been sent back with requests for exchange and notes attached such as: 'this doesn't fit me', or 'I'll never be able to use this', or 'please could I exchange this gift for the gift you sent my friend?'

'How sad', the angels said, 'as if the Great Giver doesn't know exactly which gift is right for which person'.

And just as they were sighing over all this waste, the Great Giver himself walked into the room. He smiled ruefully as he noticed the piles of unused and unwanted gifts but then broke into a peal of joyous laughter as he reached a special corner of the gifts department where there was nothing at all.

'Put some lovely flowers here', he said to the angels, and prepare a feast. This is where the gifts once were that have been sent out, received, welcomed and completely used up and spent. What joy it is in heaven to see this empty shelf!'

We worship this morning a generous God who takes the initiative in giving himself to us unreservedly. Our way of responding is to ensure that all that God gives to us doesn't return to him unused or marked unsuitable or unwanted, or held back from God's purposes. Our calling is to keep the shelves in God's gift department empty! Today is an invitation to offer all that we have to God in response to the God who first loved us. God gives us more than we can ever dream of. Let's respond by offering our very selves and all that we have to God.

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