

Giving Puts A Smile on your Face: Talk 2

Introduction to the Bible Reading

Our first Bible Reading needs a brief introduction.

The Christians in Jerusalem at the time Paul was writing his letter to the Corinthians were suffering extreme poverty.

Paul had set up a fund to help them calling on other churches to give as they are able according to their means. He was particularly impressed by the church in Macedonia, who although poor themselves, had contributed to the fund.

In our reading Paul asks the Corinthians, to complete the pledge they had previously made to give to the fund.

We're now on the 2nd week of our 3 week course on what the Bible teaches about giving. Last week I trust you were not surprised to hear that the Bible says, from start to finish, not that we should give some particular amount of money to God's work but we should give a tenth of our income.

I hope you already knew that. The task then is to work out how much one tenth is and plan a way of making sure you give it. The Church of England helpfully suggests you give 5% to your church and 5% to charities of your own choice who do God's work.

I was amused to read the story of a man whose decision years ago to give a tithe, 10% of income, now seemed to be a lot of money given his income had increased significantly.

Seeking spiritual advice from his Vicar, he was disturbed to hear the clergyman pray that the man's salary might decrease so that he could continue to afford to tithe!

This week we're going to think about sharing. 'It's not fair' and 'share nicely' are two sayings you'll have heard often enough.

Paul seems to have heard them too, if what we read from his letter to the Corinthians this morning is anything to go by. He reminds them that when God sent food called manna for the Israelites in the desert everyone had just what they needed, neither too much nor too little.

Paul had set up a fund to enable the churches to share with one another. What impressed him was the fact that the comparatively poor Macedonian Church had contributed. Now he asks the Corinthian Church to plan out how they can complete on the commitment they had previously made to give.

He says their needs to be a fair balance between abundance and need. It all sounds very fair and sensible to me.

On the one hand, Paul assures the Corinthians that no one is having an easy time at their expense. On the other hand, Paul makes it clear that any financial generosity from the Corinthians will be returned to them from Jerusalem.

The return is not money: there were other churches, not least the Macedonians, who needed such gifts more. Elsewhere, Paul is quite clear that he is talking about spiritual blessings. Paul is teaching reciprocity at the heart of giving or, to put it less elegantly: when we give, we get something back.

Now interesting though the arrangements for a fund 2,000 years ago may be, what has that got to do to with us? Well, it actually is very, very close to what the Church of England does today.

These Bible principles of giving and sharing and receiving blessing are right at the heart of what we do in the C of E. In other churches if a church wants a minister, the congregation pays for the minister. If you can afford a minister you have one. If you can't afford one, you don't have one.

The Church of England says that's not fair. Anglicans believe that God wants us to minister to people the length and breadth of the country whether they are poor or rich, whether they can afford it or not.

I'm pleased with that because it sounds to me very much what Jesus would do. Remember when we were doing the Jesus Shaped People programme how

we said one of Jesus' priorities was for People? I think the Church of England's parish system is Jesus Shaped.

So who does pay for it? Well, we do, but as Paul says, according to what we have, not what we don't have, and as Jesus' story of the parable of the talents said, each according to his ability.

The way it works is this. Each Diocese works out a budget, how much it will cost to pay, train and house ministers across the Diocese and contribute to their pensions.

Then the Dioceses work out a system whereby each parish pays a share according to their ability to pay. Different dioceses use different methods to calculate how to share it out but all of them try to find a fair way of doing it.

So this year for example, we have been asked to pay £40,700 Diocesan Share. Of course that isn't enough to pay and house 2 ministers so other more wealthy parishes pay towards the shortfall between what Shelf with Buttershaw pays and what it costs.

We are net beneficiaries. You will see then that it is vital we try to pay our Share. The share doesn't go to some mysterious group of people out there who do with it as they will. All of it is going to pay for God's kingdom work here in this parish and the rest is made up by the generosity of other richer parishes.

There is no Government grant that pays for the church. The Church of England does own property and have reserves. These pay for the Bishops, Diocesan offices, administrators, something towards pensions and retirement housing and grants to the poorer Dioceses like ours.

So you can see that it is all about giving and sharing and receiving. In the Gospel story each received a talent or talents. All that was asked of them was to use it. They were only given according to their ability and only expected to give according to their ability.

One was given 2 talents and made 2 talents more. He was not told off for

only having 2 talents in the first place. He just did what he could with what he had. Only the one who did nothing with his talent and just buried it in the ground was condemned for not using it.

I want to share with you something I said at St Aidan's last week. "Christian giving then is not about a whim, how inspired we feel, how guilty we feel or what is left over after we've paid for everything else or even what loose change we happen to have on Sunday.

It is about thanking God for all the wonderful gifts he has given to us and then in response to that, seeking before God to understand how much he wants us to give to his work, every week and then making sure it happens."

The Corinthians were eager to take their part in sharing what they had with others. However, their eagerness hadn't materialised in actually making it happen. Their motivation was right. They just hadn't put it into action.

Let us be eager to take our part in sharing what we have with others, both in our money and our talents, to extend God's kingdom, as we are able. But let's also make it happen by sitting down and planning about how to do it.

Let us pray:

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation; through your goodness we have our money to offer, the fruit of our labour and of the skills you have given us. Take us and our possessions to do your work in the world in Jesus' name. Amen.

