

Sermon on 15 March 2020

Exodus 17:1-7, 2 Cor 9:6-15, John 6:5-13

Lord, open our hearts and minds to your message, and help us to act according to your will. Amen. Please be seated.

So this is now the third Sunday with the focus on 'Growing our giving', and I guess some folks are thinking: 'I'll be glad when all this talk about money is over – I prefer to hear something about spiritual rather than material things!' I do understand, trouble is, it's totally connected, you cannot have the one without the other.

Two weeks ago, Geoff drew our attention to God's generosity, and that all good things are free gifts from God. We have not earned them! Therefore, our generosity is a response to God's generous provision to us.

Last week, Anna emphasised how important regular giving is, to enable St. Brandon's Church and the diocese to do the work that is allocated to the Christian church by God: to resource people and parishes, and to help the less fortunate ones.

Today, these messages are reinforced through our readings: the Exodus reading tells us that we need to put our trust in God, because time and again, he gives a clear sign that the answer to the sceptical question, *Is the LORD among us or not?* is that He is indeed with us, and will not let us down in times of need.

In an equally powerful way, we see through our Gospel reading that Jesus' answer to this sceptical question is the same: He provides a bounty in a situation of need, proving hereby that God is indeed amongst the people; the symbol is as clear as it can be: Jesus provides, and is, the bread of life!

In our reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul emphasises that our generosity is a logical consequence of God's generous gifts: *'And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly!'*

So far, so good: I could stop here now ... but before you start rejoicing that the sermon is so short today, I want to say a bit more ... Because I have not mentioned yet one particularly important aspect of our Corinthians reading: Joy! *'For God loves a cheerful giver!'* This sounds a bit like a contradiction in terms, doesn't it? Giving away my hard earned money?? Hold on a moment: The fact that we are able to earn that amount of money should remind us that we are indeed totally blessed: Other people on this planet sweat and toil equally hard, but they don't even stand a chance to earn a fraction of what we earn, since we belong to a privileged class in a privileged society. This is a rich blessing from God! In this we resemble the congregation in Corinth, and just like us, the congregation consisted of richer and poorer people. That is why Paul has this very practical and also pastoral advice that each one should give according to what he or she is able to. And this able-ness is not determined by the real income or wealth, but by the willingness of the mind: *'Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion'*. Paul said this for several reasons: he didn't want to be hated by the Corinthians for putting them under too much financial pressure, and also, he knew that people who hate what they are doing, will eventually stop doing it. Nobody should be driven away because of monetary reasons – far from it! Paul wanted them to understand that their generous giving will further their own spiritual health and growth! Because *'God loves a cheerful giver!'* This thought was widespread in antiquity, and it implies that material prosperity is the result of divine beneficence, and that the more you give, the more you get in return, hence the imagery with the sower and the reaping.

However, Paul also knew all too well that experience often contradicts this thought, so he points out that it is through human channels that God is working. If the Corinthians are generous, they are such a channel, because through them, God provides for the poor saints in Jerusalem. So the fact that the Corinthians had more than was adequate for their needs was a sign from God that he had a purpose for their excess. Through Paul's appeal they have become aware of what that purpose is, and by fulfilling it, they will be blessed by God,

and ample thanksgiving will rise to God from the grateful recipients. This is the vision of equality amongst Christian communities come true.

Do you see the parallels to us? We are just like the Corinthians, and every word spoken by Paul to them is directly applicable to us. Our spiritual health will be furthered by our generosity, and our joy will increase with it.

A wonderful example of the joy that arises from generous giving is ... (point to link)

I have not talked about the little unnamed boy in our Gospel reading yet.... Why was he there on his own? I imagine he wanted to go to see Jesus, and his parents or carers couldn't come with him.... So they provided him with a nice bag of food.... And there he was amongst the crowd, clutching his bag, and trying to get closer to Jesus.... And then he realised that Jesus' friends had a problem... there was no food I wonder what went through the mind of this little boy... Did he think that his few morsels would not be enough anyway, and he better kept them? No, he did not. He just followed his heart, which was overflowing by the sheer presence of Jesus ... what a privilege to be near this extraordinary man.... To hear his voice, which seemed to go directly into the heart.... The boy did not think twice: He pushed through to one of Jesus' friends, and ... just gave him his bag. No thought of what he himself would eat now. Just following this overwhelming feeling of gratefulness to be granted this encounter with Jesus ... later he would tell his parents, that he felt overwhelmed by feelings of love and joy... and through his generosity, Jesus could work the miracle...This little boy was a better disciple than all the adults – he had understood what following Jesus meant.