

SERMON FOR HARVEST 2018 | 07.10.2018

The more thankful you are, the more you live passionately and joyfully in every moment, seeing God in everything, in every person - and I can't think of a greater revolution, really, than that. bishop@CottrellStephen

I came across this quote when mousing around the parish Twitter feed and as I read it, it came to me that this is exactly what Harvest is about.

For the better part of ten years we have devoted our Harvest celebrations at St James' to one cause: the support of the small – and desperately poor – orphanage for the children of AIDS victims in the tiny township of Bonda, in eastern Zimbabwe. Run by a few Anglican nuns, the Medical Orphan Project (MOP) is one of a network of charities in this area but it is probably one of the least well known. We are involved because of Jill Hetherington, a member here, who served in Bonda as a medical sister for many years and the coordination of the charity is currently in the hands of Jo Barton who lives just around the corner in Bevan Street. And we could almost leave it there: let's do all we can to help these children. They need our help and most of us are able to be really quite generous.

But the reading from St Paul's Letter to the Corinthians – and the comment by the Bishop of Chelmsford, Stephen Cottrell – takes us above and beyond a simple appeal for money. They take us to the root of why we are giving.

In the reading St Paul is talking about the major 1st century famine which had hit Asia Minor - Macedonia, Achaia, Thessalonica and Philippi - in a big way. The community in the very wealthy city of Corinth had talked about sending relief to their less fortunate neighbours – but hadn't actually done anything about it. This was in contrast to the Macedonians who hadn't much but still managed to send money to where it was needed most.

Instead of just holding the Corinthian Church up as an example of those who talk a lot but don't do much, St Paul takes a more subtle approach by saying that he knows that they will want to give, not out of duty (and a grudging duty perhaps) but out a sense of love. Giving to someone we love (as at Christmas or on someone's birthday) becomes a token of our deepest feelings: giving is love in action.

But even if that is the case, why would the Corinthian Church give, not just to Paul whom they knew but to other Christians that they didn't know at all?

St Paul's answer to that is to talk about 'fairness': it isn't fair, he says, that some have too much and some have too little: it is the responsibility of all of us to 'even out the spread'.

Now I am not now going to wade into areas of economics where angels fear to tread! The idea of the redistribution of wealth has been debated for centuries by minds much greater than mine – from Karl Marx to Margaret Thatcher.

But the notion of giving - as part and parcel of our sense of gratitude - is older still and is the direction Bishop Stephen wants to point us to. If we see all that we have, not as our inalienable right but as the sum total of our good fortune, with the very real potential for us to do good, then the money that sits in our pockets takes on a new character altogether.

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It is days like Harvest Thanksgiving that give us the chance, realistically, to *count our blessings one by one* as that old Sunday School song has it. And if we took five minutes, how long a list would we come up with? I suspect five minutes isn't actually long enough if we really dug around for the material and personal gifts that we have been given in life. Moreover, Stephen says, when we do that – and see God in everything and everyone – then we get caught up in a massive and wonderful revolution. A revolution that touches our hearts and moves us to love even those we have never seen or known.

In a sense it doesn't matter who we give to – and each of us will have our favourite charities (of which I hope Bonda is one!) But we are not to let our giving be controlled by how much they need - great though that may be - but by the level of our gratitude, our very real thanks, for all that we have been blessed with in life.

And if Stephen is right, that kind of giving brings us real joy too!