

SERMON FOR LENT 2 | 08.03.2020

Exodus 30: 11-16; Ephesians 3: 14-21; St Mark 12: 41-44

I have in my mind's eye, two pictures from the islands on the southern coasts of Europe (places such as Lampadusa which Pope Francis visited) where so many migrants, try to cross the Mediterranean in the flimsiest of inflatable boats. In one picture there are hands stretched out to the migrants – desperately trying to make sure that people are safe; in another there is a man holding a great long pole, doing all he can to stop the dinghy reaching the shore.

You can't make people generous but I do wonder how in one, the hearts of those on the beach are full of compassion and in the other they are anything but.

And the same is often true in people's attitudes to money. Bishop Richard Holloway, in his book *Leaving Alexandria* (which several of us read last year), spends much of the opening chapter talking about living in poverty in the west of Scotland in the early 1950s. It was all comparative of course: no one of their acquaintance had any money to speak of.

But Richard describes how generous some of the poorest were; and conversely how tight were some of those with infinitely more.

And I have never quite worked out what it is that causes people to differ so much in their attitudes except to realise that, for me, it started when I was very young. Seared into my childhood memory are the days when my single parent mother clearly sacrificed her own needs for the benefit of me and my older sister. Some of the examples of her generosity hurt me still. But most of all, what she gave us was not just hard cash, but an amazing example of what generosity actually looked like: in Jesus terms, the right hand not knowing what the left had was doing.

I am not sure, even now, where her generous instincts came from. It didn't come from her parents who were always very cautious about money; and it didn't come from her sister who was married to a professor and always had more than enough. But despite all that it seems, looking back, that she had picked up something of Jesus' understanding of money without realising it and as a result it came naturally to her to give.

As part of today's tripartite presentation, shared today with Isabel and with Nieve, I want to pick out some of the Bible teaching which encourages us to give generously to the work of God here at St James'. And what I hope to share with you is this: that giving to the Church is far more to do with the heart than it is with percentages and levels of income – or even whether we are satisfied that our money is being well spent. It is all to do with saying thank-you to God.

I guess there is no better place to start any discussion about giving to the Church than with the fundamental question: *whose money is it anyway?* Because if we are not completely convinced that everything we have, everything we own, everything symbolized by those small plastic cards in our hands, has actually been given to us by God – then there will always be that nagging feeling that I am being asked to part with what is 'mine'.

Even though all the teaching that we have heard over the years has said that all we are doing is returning a small proportion of all that God has given us. Sadly I suspect that not everyone has quite reached that point yet. But we can't get very far until that fundamental shift has taken place: giving to his Church is an expression of our thankfulness for all that God has given us. It is all his anyway!

That is what Moses was talking about in our first reading: he took it for granted that everyone who considered themselves part of God's people should make sure that the 'tent of meeting', their place of prayer, was properly looked after. It was their practical 'thank-you' to the God who had saved them from being slaves in Egypt – and who had cared for them ever since.

The same qualities ring out in our Gospel story when Jesus draws our attention, and that of his disciples, to a poor widow across the street by the Temple collection pots, who is trying to make her donation as inconspicuous as possible.

And Jesus wants to point out that the fact that she didn't have much to give in overall terms is completely dwarfed by the fact that she gave – from her heart – as much as she possibly could. That is what true thankfulness and generosity look like: the rich can give more and the poor less but that isn't the point. As Jesus is showing us, no one knows how much we give except God – the God who is looking at our hearts and the way we show our love for him by what we give.

Good old St Paul, whose work in forming the Christian Church in its earliest days was completely dependent on people supporting his ministry, spelt out what we are to do: *On the first day of the week, he wrote, each of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, so that no emergency appeals have to be made when I visit you...*

I don't suppose St Paul could imagine direct debits or even weekly stewardship envelopes – but they are just the modern form of the same thing – a sign that we set aside money for God because without it, God's work through the Church simply cannot grow.

And that has been our experience here too. We have taken huge risks over the last ten years – and we have had to spend more than we were often comfortable with. Asking for money is never easy - until Jesus puts it into context: *Give, and far more will be given back to you he says. For the measure you use to give is the same measure God uses when he is giving to you! If you are mean, don't be surprised if God appears to be rather mean in what he gives to you in return.*

And I think again of the welcome given to those boats off Lampadusa: the generous ones and those so much more hard hearted...

We at St James' only have to look around us to see the amazing generosity of the Clothworkers Livery Company and previous generations who have given so much for us to enjoy.

So, in today's Church, how are we coping with the costs of maintaining our 'tent of meeting'? How do we at St James' manage to balance the books? Let's ask Isabel to take on the story:

Speaking as a Churchwarden, I thought I would say a little about the finances of St James's from our point of view as members of the congregation.

We are part of the Diocese of London, which costs some £25m a year to run, in over 500 "worshipping communities", small and large, rich and poor. These figures may seem very distant to us, but they come closer to home when we consider the Stepney Area (Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Islington) which costs £1.5m. That covers, among other things, the stipend and costs of Vicars (including ours).

Each parish is set an amount which they are expected to contribute each year to what is called the "Common Fund", but only 7 parishes out of 30 – including St James's - manage to pay the full amount, which is now £85K. It must be right for us to make our full contribution to the presence and activities of the church in our part of London.

Based on last year's accounts, these two slides give you a sight of money that comes into St James's and money that goes out. I am not talking here about money which can only be used for specific purposes, like the William Lambe Fund, but about our general financial position.

What comes in (Slide 1)

If we ignore the dark blue segment ("other"), you can see that the biggest proportion of our income last year was from letting of the church hall – over £45K. That has been dependent on the heroic hard work of volunteers and support from Adam in the Church Office. Without that our situation would be very different indeed.

The light blue section is "Giving", including our personal contributions. This is what Nieve is going to be talking about. Last year this totalled £33.5K, and that amount has been pretty flat over recent years. We give in different ways: regular giving in white envelopes, direct debits and the collection plate. And through Gift Aid we were able to recover £6.5K in income tax last year.

How do I feel about this picture? I am not comfortable that we are so dependent on the letting of the hall and on the hard work of unpaid volunteers to run it. It would be good if those of us who are part of the church family here could contribute more. I know that we are a very varied group of people, and some of us can afford more than others. But I realised when preparing this that I myself had not given a second thought to the amount of my direct debit since I set it up some years ago. I just took it for granted.

What goes out (Slide 2)

The big blue segment is our contribution to the Common Fund, including the costs of the spiritual and community leadership role of our Vicar, as well as support to poorer parts of the Stepney Area. You will see also the amount spent on church running costs and the maintenance of the church – which I often take for granted.

Charities (Slide 3)

We do also have specific collections for particular causes, through Children's Society boxes (thanks to Laura for her work on those), Lent Appeals and the like. And we support good work in the community, of which the most important is Pack-up, which provides weekly lunches for the local street community. We often feel that we should be doing more of this kind of activity, but that depends not only on financial resources but on time resources of those who might be able. That is a constant challenge for congregations like ours, where so many people have busy jobs and family commitments.

We can all be most grateful for the scrupulous and careful way in which our finances are overseen by our Treasurer, Susan, supported by Alastair. We can be assured that the money we give will be valued and looked after.

But it is good to stand back every so often and take stock. The Radio 4 programme "Money Box" starts with a song including the line "Financial review is long overdue". This is a good opportunity for us to think about what we as a congregation gain from being part of the church family of St James's and what we contribute. So how can we best do that? For that we turn to Nieve, our new Stewardship coordinator.