

Stewardship at Great St Mary's

1 Chronicles 29.10-17

10 Then David blessed the Lord in the presence of all the assembly; David said: 'Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, for ever and ever. ¹¹Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. ¹²Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. ¹³And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.

14 'But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill-offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. ¹⁵For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope. ¹⁶O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. ¹⁷I know, my God, that you search the heart, and take pleasure in uprightness; in the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you.

2 Corinthians 9.6-15

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;

his righteousness endures for ever.'

¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Luke 5.1-11 Jesus Calls the First Disciples

5 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' ⁵Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

'All things come from you and of your own do we give you' (1 Chron 29.14)

I'd like to begin with a story:

A strongman in a circus sideshow demonstrated his power before a large audience. Towards the end, he squeezed the juice from a lemon between his hands. He then said to his audience, 'I will offer £100 to anyone in the audience who can squeeze another drop from this lemon. A thin scholarly looking woman came forward, picked up the lemon, strained hard and managed to get a drop. The strongman was amazed. He paid the woman and said 'I've been doing this act for 16 years, and tonight is the first time I've had to pay out. What is the secret of your strength?' 'Practice' the woman answered. 'I was a church treasurer for 32 years!' (*from Giving for Life talk 'Cycles of generosity'.*)

I'm sure this is not our treasurer's experience, but sometimes it can feel like our needs for money require us to try and squeeze more money out of those who already support the church, especially in times when the cost of living has been rising and there are many good causes that compete for our donations.

It is a few years since we have invited people at Great St Mary's to consider their financial giving to Great St Mary's. Like many churches, we rely on regular giving to pay for our expenditure on Ministry and mission, in our case that is the cost of the clergy, our music department, youth and children's ministry. We are lucky to have the tower, the shop and café to generate income that pays for our regular buildings upkeep and our operations and admin staff. Our reserves are small, and we will have to fundraise for any major building projects.

Good Stewardship is an important dimension of our lives and discipleship. The Stewardship campaign we are starting today recognises that this is something that is at the heart of being church, and it's of course not just about financial giving, but also, about how we use our God-given time and talents.

Our OT reading today, from the First Book of Chronicles, includes those well know words, which we find in the liturgy, at the preparation of the table: 'Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours (vs.11) 'All things come from you, and of your own have we given you'. (1 Chron. 29.14)

This bible passage is set towards the end of David's reign, with him preparing the ground for the next generation, his son Solomon, to build the temple. Concerned about Solomon's youthful age and lack of experience, David has called together the national assembly, asking the people to give generously for the building of the temple. He starts with himself, giving both from the wealth of his office (1 Chron 29.1,2) and from his personal funds (1 Chron 29.3). He doesn't ask others to give until he has given himself; and I am asking you to give in that same spirit.

We are here today, worshipping in this much loved building, thankful for those who have gone before us; over the centuries, giving generously in support of this Church and its mission. As your vicar, I am so grateful to all who have been faithfully supporting us through their regular giving and designated donations, to enable us to look after our buildings, both this Church and Michaelhouse; to offer a place of prayer and welcome for many, with high quality worship and a caring community who, without shouting about it, looks out for others, offers support, friendship, and above all, witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ. Together, we aspire to the Diocesan vision, 'to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ'.

Being generous givers requires faith and trust. It is one thing to say together in the liturgy, 'All things come from you, and of your own do we give you', and another, to believe this in the depths of our hearts. After all, most of us have to work extremely hard to earn enough money to pay the rent or the mortgage in a place like Cambridge; to cover the costs involved in raising a family; to cover all the bills and to have a little left over for leisure and a holiday.

Whether we are wealthy or not; whether we are on a high salary or on a low income, in our society our experience is that money and possessions are treated as a private affair which we don't talk about. Our instinct, conditioned by society's expectations, is to acquire more, because we are told that is how we can feel safe, or safer than when we don't have much.

The Bible encourages us time and time again to start from a place of trust and love in God, who knows all our needs and loves us more than we can ever grasp. Our living and our giving are our response to God's love for us. It is, to be generous: with our time, our talents, our wealth, in the service of God and of others.

The Old Testament practice of tithing is rooted in that recognition that 'all things come from God and of God's own do we give'. In Luke's gospel, Jesus emboldens his listeners by saying, 'give and it shall be given unto you. (Luke 6.38). And, in our second reading today, Paul writes to the Corinthians 'Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.' (2 Cor 9.7)

Paul's advice, for each to give as we have made up our minds, is good advice. Making the decision to set aside a part of one's income for the work of God is liberating.

As a family, we found that making the decision to tithe and set aside a percentage for God's work by supporting the Church, became the starting point of how we spend our money. It changed our perspective on the rest of our expenditure and makes us thankful to be able to contribute to God's mission in the world.

And so today, as we invite you to prayerfully consider your giving to Great St Mary's, we hope what you give is not because the treasurer makes us feel guilty and squeezes the last drop out of us!

We give because of the joy and privilege of participating in God's loving mission in the world - as generous people, who trust in God and want to contribute to the life and work of Great St Mary's.

Amen.