

All are valuable gifts, all are necessary, all reveal the loveliness of Christ in our midst; all help to create a generous church.

As part of the church of God in this place, my prayer is that we will continue to grow as a graceful, generous and glad community of people who are loving our neighbours and offering the message of the gospel in an attractive and relevant way. We have the privilege and the challenge of two lovely church buildings to look after and a church hall to offer in service to the community. All of this provides a challenge to us in our giving of our time, talents and money as we seek to maintain our presence here. At the moment we are just about managing both in our people and financial resources, so on this Sunday when we are focusing on giving, can:

1. Say a big Thank You to everyone who does contribute to our communal life in any way and
2. I ask you to pray and think about this and talk to John, our Treasurer, me or our churchwardens Joy and Lucy if you think you would like to do more, do less or have any bright ideas.

God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that, always having enough of everything you may share abundantly in every good work. [2 Cor 9.8]

Amen.

Second Sunday before Advent 19 The Grace of Giving

Exodus 35.4-21; Psalm 98; 2 Corinthians 9.6-8; Matthew 26.1-13

This week I had some time off and went to Frost's Garden Centre at Millett's Farm. Christmas preparations are in full swing with life-sized singing reindeer; yards of tinsel; baubles by the hundreds, seasonal knick-knacks; advent calendars with or without chocolate; expensive models of nostalgic Christmas scenes..... You would be forgiven for thinking that Christmas is all about fuelling a fantasy based on consumption and not about the great gift of God to the world in the shape of his son, Jesus.

God is all about giving: The gospel of John tells us that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..* and as we read through the whole sweep of scripture we find that God's people are encouraged not to be self-seeking, but self-giving and generous in every aspect of their lives.

So as we think about GIVING this morning, I am borrowing three words from Bishop Tom Wright to help us to think through the place of giving in the Christian life:

GRACE, GENEROSITY AND GRATITUDE

Grace

Paul reminds the Corinthians in chapter 8:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty, you may become rich'. [2 Cor 8.9]

This is the beating heart of the gospel.

All we do is a response to that Grace of God in Jesus. From that flows the giving of ourselves in worship, praise, love, fellowship and service to the world.

When we know we have been grasped in some way by the grace of God, then God's grace works in us by the Holy Spirit to give us a desire to live lives of generosity and grace towards others.

Did you notice the last verse of the passage from Exodus?

*And they came, everyone **whose heart was stirred and whose spirit was willing** and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting and for all its service. [Ex 35.21]*

Let's pray that the Holy Spirit will stir our hearts and give us a willing spirit so that we may excel in generosity.

Generosity

Left to our own devices, we tend to retreat into our little boxes – we close down, develop a bunker mentality, hold tightly onto what gives us security – but God's Holy Spirit sets us free from that, enabling us to give of ourselves and our things.

The woman we read about in the gospel brought very costly ointment in an alabaster jar to anoint Jesus. The ointment would have been worth a year's salary – so it was a costly and an extravagant gesture – but it represented her love for Jesus, her anointing him for burial and it was a prophetic act, saying that Jesus *deserved* this lavish outpouring of love and expense.

Generosity in giving us first about giving of ourselves, then about giving of our other resources. In building and furnishing the Tabernacle, the people of God were encouraged to give from what they had, both things and skills. Could they give gold or fine linen, or goat's hair or spices – good! Could they provide skills in metal work or wood work or needlework – good! All would be gratefully received to the Glory of God.

In the Church in Corinth, the generosity being required was financial. They were taking a collection of money to send to the Church in Jerusalem for the relief of the poor.

This collection for the church in Jerusalem was a longstanding, on-going project that had begun with the church in Antioch promising to send money to help the poor in Jerusalem. Paul then encouraged all the Gentile churches he founded to join in – not just to assist the poor, but to show unity between the Jewish and Gentile parts of the young Church. It took the churches a long time to complete this work of service and we don't know what happened to the collection when it got to Jerusalem. It also tells us that the collection plate is as old as the Church itself!

As a church we have a holy obligation to meet the needs of the poor and needy among us, as we are able. In this case our financial giving is part of the ministry of the whole church. We are all called to give alms and care for those in need.

Paul is very clear that how much we give is a prayerful decision we alone must make. We must not give grudgingly or reluctantly, but cheerfully and gladly. We give as we have made up our mind, sharing the blessings we have with others, giving the first of our labours, not the left-overs. Generous giving is a beautiful thing.

And Gratitude brings us full circle. All things come from you, O Lord, and of your own do we give you. We say this at the offertory each Sunday.

As Christians we are invited into God's banquet, to feast and celebrate, to give praise and thanksgiving to God. All that we have is God's generous provision and we give gladly out of the bounty we have received. We give of ourselves in gratitude for what God has done for each one of us.

I have recently received a couple of anonymous gifts, one left in church for me and one on my doorstep. Both beautiful, to be enjoyed. I assume they have been given as expressions of gratitude and love – I am very grateful for them both.

Gratitude for each other, for the church, for what God has done in our lives, generates glad and generous hearts, which spills over into our own giving of ourselves, our time, our skills, our financial resources.