

Sermon for Stewardship Sunday 20 October 2024 - The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity

*Texts Deuteronomy 26.1-16; 2 Corinthians 9.6-15; Mark 10.35-45*

## **Stewardship Sunday**

There is a magazine sold by those who are homeless in the UK to raise funds called '*Big Issue*'. One of the things I particularly enjoy in it is a regular feature article called 'Letter to my younger self'. In it, a famous person is invited to reflect on what advice they would give to themselves as a young man or woman, given what they now know and have experienced about life.

I would dearly love to know what the Apostle James and his brother John, would have written had they had to write this article later in life. In particular, what would their reflection be on this episode we've heard about in the Gospel today when they urge Jesus to give them prime positions seated on thrones next to him in his kingdom?

I think they would have looked back on this episode with a mixture of shame but also wry humour. Shame because of in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus and as they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the call to share the good news of Christ, they saw the irrelevance of the human ambitions in the light of Christ's sacrifice for us. Humour, because with the insight and wisdom of what they were then living out as Christ's disciples, they would have realised how comprehensively they had got the wrong end of the stick and yet now they had found joy.

As teenagers or young men in their early 20s living in an occupied country – the desire for status, power and security seemed to make perfect sense. But looking back, in the light of the Cross of Jesus, they realised that following and serving Christ involved a very different set of values. Not status but humility, not power but service and not security by the world's standards but the security which comes from Christ alone. I think in their letter to their younger self, they would proclaim the paradox that though Christ called them to die to their worldly ambitions and sources of security; in doing this, they had found in Christ, the source of true life, the one who gave their lives meaning. They had also discovered that in giving of themselves, they were not only a source of life and blessing to others, but they too were truly blessed by God.

And it is this paradox which we called to explore on Stewardship Sunday. It is a day which we are called to consider our response to God's overwhelming generosity to us, shown above all, in Christ. But it is a day where above all, we are bought into the paradox at the heart of our Christian faith, that in giving, we receive and in dying, we are born into eternal life.

So, the first question is how do we, as followers of Christ, root ourselves in his topsy-turvy calling which is so different to what we know gives us security in the world?

Our Bible readings today both from the Book of Deuteronomy and also from St Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians give us a very clear steer. Our starting point is to recognise both the depths of our own human frailty and at the same time, the immensity of God's love and care for us. Moses tells the Israelites to remember their vulnerability as a wandering people, the slavery they had endured in Egypt and how God had saved them and brought them to the Promised Land.

Part of our frailty as human beings is that we tend to forget, particularly when circumstances change. This is why Moses then stresses to the people how important it is that they show their obedience their "yes" to God, by offering regularly the first fruits of what they receive from their land and crops.

And St Paul makes a similar plea to the Christians in Corinth, urging them to give generously to the Christian community in Jerusalem who are threatened with famine. He reminds them of what God has done for them in Christ and goes on to tell them the paradox that as they open themselves in generous giving, so they will not only be a source of life and blessing to others, but they will be blessed by God and find that new life of God's kingdom welling up in them.

Today, we too are reminded of the paradox that it is in following Christ, in the offering of our lives, gifts and talents to Him that we find our true selves and are richly blessed by God. In the light of this. I am reminded of these blessings every day at Holy Trinity, and I want to say an enormous thank you to each one of you. For without your generosity of your giving to Holy Trinity of your time, skills and money, we would not be here today. The church does not receive external subsidies, so we rely on you for all that we do. The flourishing of the church today, for all that happens in our worship, young people, choirs, coffee, events and outreach – none of this would be possible without your tireless and generous help. So again, a very big thank you!

The Spirit of God is constantly calling us to the new and today, on Stewardship Sunday, I invite you to do two things.

1. To thank God for all that we receive at His hands. As we give thanks to God, we open ourselves to the riches of His grace Wherever we are in our lives at present, whether in a hard or good phase, the act of reflecting on and thanking God for his blessings roots us firmly on God.

2. To think about our response to God's generosity towards us. Part of our response to God is our financial giving. So, we are asked to give freely, generously and regularly as far as we are able as part of our Christian discipleship. There are a variety of ways we can do this – through weekly donations, through our Pledge Scheme, gifts and legacies. But stewardship is about more than just the use of the money we have, important though that is.

There are two factors to consider here. The first is to remember our calling as human beings, made in the image of God. Each one of us is precious in His sight and each one of us is unique. One of the main ways in which we fulfil our calling to be truly human, truly the person whom God created us to be, is to identify the special gifts

He has given to each one of us. For it is in finding and using these gifts that we become truly ourselves and truly fulfilled.

The other factor to think about, especially today on Stewardship Sunday, are the needs which exist both here in our church and in the world to which we might bring our gifts and make a difference.

There are many needs and opportunities to serve at Holy Trinity - to keep our worship flourishing here by helping as sidespeople, welcomers, servers and chalice bearers and helping us to glory God by singing in our choir; leading our young people; supporting our ministry to support the elderly, the frail and the lonely . There are also many other areas including our ministry to those who are homeless and those whose lives are precarious. We also need help as we strive to become more environmentally friendly as a church and also reach out as advocates to help others and also to help run our social and fundraising activities including fairs, special meals and quiz evenings.

Each of us here has gifts and gifts which are all needed for the gifts which God gifts to each person are unique. It is as if you can imagine the life and ministry of our church to be like a beautiful quilt or a fine mosaic. What we may wish to offer may feel to us, tiny, insignificant, unimportant. Yet when we put all these gifts and talents together, they create something of great beauty and strength.

So I would urge you today, as you reflect and pray about this. If this is the first time you've done this here, or perhaps the first time in a new area of church life, just be willing to have a go. It may be God is calling you to something you have not done before and you feel unconfident that you will be able to do it. Don't worry – just offer. First of all, we can provide training in most area – second, it is by trying and making mistakes that we learn and everyone benefits as a result.

It is particularly important that we are open to this at this time, as we have the gift of our beautifully renovated church and are looking seriously at the next phase of our Building project. God has given us an enormous gift – how can we use this to be a channel of God's love and hope in this community?

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, makes the point that through the Spirit, God is often bringing to us unexpected gifts to equip us to new areas into which He may be leading us now. So, let's be open to this and especially affirm and encourage these gifts as we spot them in others. Encourage them. Invite them too to have a go to help us to navigate from the old to the new.

Let's end by returning to James and John. James died a martyr's death in AD 44 having led the growing church in Jerusalem whilst John lived to old age and shared his faith above all in the writing of his Gospel. Both had found in Christ, the source of life and love which is stronger than death and they responded by offering their lives in love and gratitude. Where is God calling us to offer ourselves today?

**The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green**