

Sermon: St. James Cambridge

Easter 5

28 April 2013 Start of Stewardship Campaign

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1 Chronicles 29. 10-17

Ps. 148.1-6

Rev. 21.1-6

John 13.31-35

‘All things come from you and of your own do we give you’ 1 Chron 29.14

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 of economic austerity.

But, when we think about generosity and giving in the light of our faith, this shouldn’t be the case at all.

Today we start a Stewardship campaign, inviting each member of St James to think about our giving, especially our giving in support of the mission of our Church. The motto is ‘All is gift from God ...let us respond generously’. We are reminded that our giving is in response to God’s generous giving.

‘All things come from you, and of your own have we given you’. (1 Chron. 29.14)

Our first reading this morning from the 1 Chronicles contains familiar words, which we use at the offertory in the All Age service, but we may not have been aware as to where they come from. The passage we heard is set towards the end of David’s reign. God has told David that because he had been a warrior who had spilt blood (1 Chron 28.3), he would not be allowed to build the temple. Solomon his son would have that privilege. Concerned about his youthful age and lack of experience, David sets about preparing the materials needed for the building of the temple. – Note, that David is not sulking in response to God’s decision to have Solomon build the temple, but David responds with generosity doing all he can to support the project.

In the passage we heard David was speaking to the national assembly he had called together. He challenged the people to give generously for the building of the temple. This is an inspiring story of God’s people giving generously to God’s work.

And David starts with himself – he gives both from the wealth of his office (1 Chron 29.1,2) and also from his personal funds (1 Chron 29.3). He doesn’t ask others to give until he has given himself.

David is giving funds for the temple for the building of the church, but he is clear that this gift is for the worship and glory of God. He says to the people 'The task is great, because of the palatial structure is not for man but for the Lord God.' Sometimes it's easy to lose sight of the fact that our giving is for God –which ever channel it might be directed through.

Is this how we think about our giving? I suspect, most of the time we don't, especially when our budgets are tight and material things cause us considerable anxiety. We think about the things we own as our own, for our need and pleasure. Whether we've been lucky to be born into a rich family or worked hard to earn money, or feel we haven't got much in the first place, our attitude towards ownership is that is ours – human ownership is possessive and exclusive and wants to acquire more. It's 'my', or perhaps, 'our' car, my/our house, my i-phone, my bike, my telly, my laptop, my garden.

We live in a society, where there is so much emphasis on possessions and so much anxiety about how much have, that giving generously for God's mission in the world can feel like just another demand on our resources.

And yet, as the scriptures tell us: we cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve God and money – making the decision to give no matter what our circumstances is freeing – as it's saying: yes God, I trust you.

God's approach to ownership is generous and shared. Right from the beginning, the creation story in Genesis, God gives stewardship of creation to human beings – it is for us to enjoy the creation, take care of it and work with God to enable it to flourish. Frequently, human greed and egotism gets in the way, but when human beings co-operate, society flourishes and there is well-being for all. Hence, the practice of tithing, in recognition of God's ownership, and to make sure that those who have no source of income would have enough for their daily living. The Bible offers us the paradox – 'give and it shall be given unto you' (Luke 6.38)

For us Christians, of course, God's generosity finds it's ultimate expression in the self-giving of Jesus on the cross, so that we may have life and participate in his risen life – for the sake of the whole world.

We don't live our lives for ourselves; we live our lives for God. As John's gospel this morning reminds us – love one another as I have loved you – we are called to be instruments of God's love in the world; we participate in God's mission, reaching out those around us enabling them to draw closer to God's love.

David was called to build a church; we are called to serve God in this community to the glory of God.

As we consider our giving, we don't give because the treasurer makes us feel guilty and squeezes the last drop out of us! We give because we feel privileged to participate in God's loving mission in the world - as people who trust God and live as people of hope. Amen.