



Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Rickmansworth

**Sermon preached by the Revd Deborah Snowball
Stewardship Sunday – 17th May 2009**

As many of you will know, we have allocated today as Stewardship Sunday. Stewardship – in fullest meaning – is about recognising the things that God has given to us in love, and responding to this by giving back to God rightful honour and praise, as well sharing this love with others. I have a strong tendency towards Stewardship in church being about the giving of time and talents as well as the giving of money and you may well have picked up on the fact that virtually every sermon I preach includes some encouragement for each of us to respond with our time and prayer and God-given gifts and skills to the work of the church, that is – the work of the gospel.

Stewardship takes us to the heart of the gospel: “As the father has loved me, so I have loved you... And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...” God’s love for us is reflected in the many good things that God has given to us in our lives. It is also reflected in the way in which the church – capital and small ‘c’, local and international – the way in which the church responds to those who come to worship and to those who are in need. I know just how much time a good few people dedicate to the life of our church through the giving of their time and skills. Without the assistance of many helpers, so much of what happens to make worship in our church possible, as well as the myriad other activities, would simply be unsustainable.

As I have already said, Stewardship – in its fullest meaning – is about recognising the things that God has given to us in love, and using these to share this love with others. My next line though, as you may well guess, is that time and talents alone do not help us to pay our bills. Bills comes in all forms: utilities, paper for the Sunday pew leaflet or service booklets, requisites such as wine or wafers, and even plaster and paint which we are going to need to do some running repairs to various parts of our beautiful building. (Don’t panic, nothing is going to fall on your heads, unless you happen to be sitting in the Chancel, that is!)

These bills, of whatever variety, are a sort of visible sign of the ministry that goes on behind the scenes. The repair of our building and the consumables such as paper, bread and wine are just the tip of the iceberg. The fact that St. Mary’s is a lively, well attended church – and has been for many years – means that there are plenty of people here who give generously: and that, quite simply, allows for you to have a full time stipendiary parish priest here, as well as some time from Ministers of the Methodist Church. We are the paid people, and I fully acknowledge and give thanks for the ministry of both Anne and Michael who do so much for us as well.

What do we get up to? A very brief run down of a week in my diary alone will tell you that this week has included: three services last Sunday as well as our Youth Group in the evening, sweeping up fallen plaster in the Sanctuary, writing a variety of articles for Link, a funeral as well as a visit for another for next Friday, a service at St. Mary’s Court, a church council meeting – with time for preparation that that required, communion here as well as at Seymour House on Tuesday, Tuesday Night Prayers, Confirmation Preparation Group, School assemblies, Pastoral visits to some people at

home, a meeting to prepare a Retreat Week in the Deanery next spring, discussions regarding the Spirituality Day in October which I am helping to organise, phone calls to a variety of folk regarding a range of pastoral issues – some quite challenging and offering support for difficult and upsetting situations, travelling with the Churchwardens to their ‘swearing in’, stuffing Stewardship envelopes, a baptism visit yesterday morning, meeting with the Sidespeople yesterday too, asking for information from our insurers about fire alarms... oh, and writing this sermon. In addition, there have been discussions with others as to the ministry we offer to both older and younger members of our community and how we might develop these, as well as answering emails throughout the week.

This gives you a glimpse of how the ministry of our church, St. Mary’s, *our* ministry as the parish church, carries on throughout the week and touches the lives of literally hundreds of people of all ages... think of the hundred or so people who attended the funeral I took on Monday and the children at St. Mary’s for assemblies – as well as each of you in our congregation here, and you will see how the numbers begin to add up. You make this ministry possible.

In addition to all that the ministers here do, is the work that others do to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others beyond our walls. Today is a fine example, where communion will be taken to those who can no longer come to church, as well lunch being provided for those of more mature years who might be glad of the company. This ministry is time and talents, today I ask you all to consider how you might help us to back up the time and talents that many offer, with financial support to continue the wider work that we do – including the bills that I mentioned earlier.

It is not only about bills though; it is about vision and possibility. How are our Church and Church Centre fit for purpose, and what ongoing work may need to be done to ensure they remain so? Also, what further possibilities do we wish to consider in certain areas of the work of our church so that we do as Jesus tells us, “go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...”

All of you are here because others have made this possible through their faithful attendance and sacrificial giving in the past. I am inviting you to do the same for future generations.

Some very simple facts and figures:

If you take a newspaper each day, on average, the amount you spend each week will be somewhere between £3 and £7 – depending on the name and the content! What some people give is not actually matching this amount. If we remind ourselves that Stewardship is a response in love to the love God has shown to each of us, to make us squirm in our seats, we may well ask whether, when the amount of money we give to the church is less than we spend on our newspapers, is this showing God the love we think is due to him? We might ask the same question of those who like a Café Nero coffee a few times a week – or Hot Chocolate if you are me! The cost of these soon mounts up over a month – and just two or three a week will take you to over £20 or so a month. For those of you who like your wine... need I say more?! We may well squirm, and I am uncomfortable saying it, because I know that some people really do give what they can. For all that each of you who give already, I really do thank you. I am just encouraging us to think whether we can give more – in love.

This is a difficult time financially for many; there is no denying that fact. I am charged though, with the maintenance and furtherance of the gospel in this place – each of us is charged with this by virtue of our Christian beliefs. We need each others help to do this with our time and talents, we also need each others help to do this financially too.

This year, in the letter you receive, I have suggested that we each need to consider upping our giving by 7% - the reason being that this is the amount our costs increased last year. Last year’s Stewardship campaign yielded an increase of only 2½% - this simply will not enable us to continue

on a sound financial footing. If you give £5 a week, 7% is actually only 35p... less than a bar of chocolate!

So how might you respond today?

1. Pray. Pray for wisdom and judgement as you consider what you can do, or what you might need to change in the realm of finance to better support St. Mary's.
2. Complete the Stewardship Banker's Order if you have not already done so as this ensures that, even if you are not here, your money will come to your church on a regular basis, even if you happen to be away.
3. Sign up to Gift Aid. I know I go on and on about it to the point that it makes even me look heavenward when the words come out of my mouth! But. If you simply put money in the bowl when you could have gift aided it, in a sense, if you put in £5 we have lost an extra £1.40 that we could have had simply by your filling in a simple form.
4. Pray: for yourselves, for one another, for the community we serve and for the church. Give thanks for all that we do, pray for all that we could do better and pray also for wisdom for the leaders of our church.

Unusually for me, I end with a joke!

Three boys are extolling the various virtues of their fathers. The first says, "When my dad writes something called a poem he gets £100 for it." The second boy says, "That's nothing! If my dad writes something called a song he gets £200 for it." The third boy chips in, "When my dad writes something called a sermon, after he's finished reading it, it takes like eight people to collect all the money in."

In response to this I would say, if you give through the plate, give the sidespeople something to weigh them down today, and if you give through a Banker's Order, let the person at your bank have something to talk about too when you fill in your form!

Amen!