

Stewardship Sunday 2010

Falling within the season of Easter, this year's Stewardship Campaign provides a useful focus for reflection upon all that has been given to us by our generous God, and upon what we can and should give back in return.

In one of the Eucharistic Prayers, following the *Sursum Corda* (the dialogue between Celebrant and People), the prayer continues: *It is our duty and our joy at all times and in all ways to praise you*: on Sundays we come together to join our prayers and praises with the gathered community of God, but it is not only on Sundays that we do this. We give praise to God through our manner of living, the choices that we make, and the support we give to the Church of God.

Today though, I invite you to reflect particularly on how you support St. Mary's financially – as it is as a direct result of the money you give, that the ministry of St. Mary's is both maintained, and has the potential to be developed more fully and more widely.

I'm going to use three quotes today, of things said by three regular members of our congregation as 'staging posts' along the way for this sermon – with a bit of religion and spirituality thrown in for good measure as well.

The first came from whilst tidying up after a Service recently, which included putting the Collection into the safe. One of the people around remarked that it was a pretty small collection. I pointed out that some of the people probably gave through the Stewardship Scheme and so wouldn't be putting cash into the plate. The reply came back, "I think they should be doing both". I raised my eyebrows and thought – well that's pretty impressive. I shan't tell you who it was... there are many people floating around in the Vestry after Services, and you might have a word or two to say to them if I told you.

What impressed me about this response was a) that the person is even more hardline than many fans of Stewardship might be – suggesting that people give by both means and b) that they were prepared to say it!

Admitting to how much we fish out of our pockets as the Collection Plate is passed along the line during the Offertory Hymn, is rather like admitting to which party you voted for in the General Election – only, I think people might be a bit more upfront on the latter one!

The Bible suggests tithing as the measure to give: a tenth of one's income – 10%. Now there are debates as to whether it should be a tenth before outgoings or after, and whether one should include, or not, as part of the 10% money one may give to other Charities. Some suggest that if you do the latter, then 5% is what should be given to the Church. If I have lost you somewhere in the maths, let me ask you this instead: are you able to say, hand on heart, that you have sat down with a pad of paper, worked out your income and expenditure and decided on a reasonable and generous amount to give to the Church which reflects fully the reasonable and generous love that is shown to you by God?

I am aware that the scramble to get to church on a Sunday morning may leave some less than aware of how much is in your wallet or purse before you leave the house: what that results in though is some people putting a few coppers, or a couple of pounds onto the Collection Plate when, if a little more thought went into it, as well as prayer and reflection, then it would be a more reasonable and generous amount that would reflect the reasonable and generous love that is shown to us by God. I am well aware that not everyone gets to church every week and so some weeks we don't get money from these people at all.

The second quote I give was made as I was preparing the Stewardship Letter that you are invited to collect before you leave today. As I was preparing the letter someone said, “When you think of all the hours spent writing the letter, and then the money spent on the printing and stuffing of envelopes it must cost at least £150... why don’t we just say, ‘give us the money?!’”

I have to admit, it does take a long time to write the letter – and the sermon – as I want both to be an encouragement for all that we give financially to be a reflection of our love for the God who loves us. The situation we are in at present though could well have the potential to be depressing as we have had to use some of our Reserves to pay for day to day bills – and this, as is not a general route that we should be going down. Churches cannot run on a credit card style, ‘put it on the never-never’, nor can they ‘rob Peter to pay Paul’. At the end of the day, the only money we have to spend on the work of St. Mary’s and the wider Church is yours: your money supporting the work of your Church. It is as simple as that. If we have to use some money to pay bills, we can’t use it elsewhere.

I have used the phrase *reasonable and generous* a number of times. Some of you may catch resonances of Romans 12 within it.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

I have gone back to the Authorised Version because it is how I hear in my head, having sung it many times as part of the Anthem: Greater love by John Ireland. I used it because of that word *reasonable*. In the Greek, this particular word may be rendered as *reasonable* or *thoughtful*. You might like to play with the phrase: which is your *reasonable* service, which is your *thoughtful* service.

The exhortation is to the Romans to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, and, in some senses, this is what we do when we give of our time and our talents, but it is also what we do when we give of our finances. All that we have worked for, all that we have been given as gifts of body and mind and intellect, all of these gain financial reward, and it is of this reward that we are invited to give *reasonable* – and *thoughtful* – service to God.

Last year, I encouraged those of you who do not give through the Stewardship Scheme to consider doing so as it guarantees our income even if you are occasionally not here on a Sunday morning. It also means you don’t have to scabble around in your pockets when the Collection Plate comes towards you (unless you are going to follow the exhortation of the first person I quoted and give through both methods!) This encouragement comes again, and you will read more about the difference it makes in my Stewardship Letter which you will find in your named envelope as you leave.

Last year I encouraged an increase in giving of 7% to match our increase in expenditure: of those in the Stewardship Scheme who did increase their giving almost matched it by reaching an increase of 6.8%. Not many increased their giving though. This year we need to aim even higher – 10%. If all of those who currently give by Stewardship were to increase their giving by 10% we would clear last year’s deficit. And if all of you who do not give through Stewardship did so, and if we all Gift Aided our money, then we might get back into ‘profit’ again.

The third quote from a member of our congregation: “Just tell them, if they don’t give more, they will all go to hell!” It was said in jest and I don’t believe any of us *will* go to hell if

we don't give more, but I do believe that our church will eventually end up in a sorrier situation than that in which we find ourselves at present.

St. Mary's is a happy and vibrant church community where we do support one another and where people genuinely do want to do what they can to ensure our Church remains viable and safe in all aspects of its life. Today the sermon is about money – and it only happens once a year... so I encourage you and urge you to think and to pray, and to respond in a manner which does indeed reflect your love for God and God's love for you.

Last year I ended with a joke, but this year, before I close in prayer, I offer as slight amusement, a rather unfortunate quote from one of the more senior clerics in our Diocese. All clergy make mistakes sometimes, as this poor chap closed his sermon by saying to the assembled throng: "I've upped my giving, so up yours!"

Let us pray.

Lord, you have given us all we have,
time, talent, health, wealth,
gifts in abundance.
Just as you have given generously to us,
So may we return generously to you.
We make our prayer through your most gracious gift to us,
our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Revd Deborah Snowball
16th May 2010