

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

May 13<sup>th</sup> 2007.

Stewardship Sunday at St Mark's

A text from our Gospel reading:

'Those who love me will keep my word...' (John 14.23)  
says Jesus.

Loving him, we will not only keep his word safe in our hearts, and ponder it to draw out ever deeper meaning there; but we shall also keep his word in the other obvious sense: we shall do our best to put it into practice in the details of our daily life.

Another text now, from our first reading: 'People will bring into [the Holy City] the glory and the honour of the nations.' (Revelation 21.26)

This text looks for new heaven and a new earth, when the mysterious city of God will be the focal point of eternal human existence. And to this focal point all that is good and valuable and glorious from all the nations will be brought in. From this focal point all that is healing and life-giving and of God will flow out.

We do not live in that final time yet. We live in the age in which we are struggling to keep Jesus' word amidst the messiness of human life as we know it. Yet we do live in an age in which the Church, God's new community, is set as a foretaste, a flawed yet real sign of the holy city that is promised. So the Church, like the holy city to come, can expect to be a place into which the people will bring the glory and honour of the nations, so that healing and life-giving truth and love may flow out of it.

At St Mark's we are keeping this Sunday as 'Stewardship Sunday' to reflect on the practicalities of these truths. As a church, we are a community of people who seek to love Jesus and keep his word; as a church, we should expect to find people joyfully bringing in their very best, so that love and healing may flow out.

On this stewardship Sunday we reflect in particular on the significance of Christian financial giving – not because other kinds of giving, of time and talents, of love and effort, are insignificant. Clearly, they are essential if we are to be a Christian community at all. But we reflect on the significance – the *theology*, may I say? – of Christian financial giving because sometimes it is misunderstood and misrepresented.

Christian giving, in the sense of true stewardship, does not start with the church's perceived needs. It isn't, if you like, a response to the thought, 'O my goodness, if we don't raise some funds the roof will fall in and the vicar will be taken away.' That is to start at the wrong end.

Christian giving should start with ourselves – our faith and gratitude, our need to express our love for God not only with our lips, but with our lives. It should be a joyful rather than a panicky or grudging act. It is part of our worship. That is why we take up the collection in the centre of the service: we're not suddenly passing the bag round as if to say, 'you need to pay for being here or else we won't be able to afford the heating

another time'. No, we pass the bag round, and bring it up to the altar to give people the opportunity to say 'I love you' to God in that very tangible way. It's a symbolic act. That's why the bags we present at the altar represent the love not only of the people who have put something in them, but also the love and response of those who are making their offering another way – through a standing order at the bank, for example. Some churches give the opportunity to those people to slip a little card into the bag plate, representing themselves and their offering - and also, as they say, to overcome the embarrassment of letting the bag pass them by during the collection. But that shouldn't be necessary. We're mature enough not to look at other people and wonder about what they're doing. The offering, whether it's a moment you physically put something in or not, is a personal moment of loving response to God's goodness – an offering made from the heart. That's why there is another practice which some other churches use which I think is quite good: to make the collection an act which stands by itself, often with people seated as music is played – not combining it with the singing of a hymn, so that people can think fully about what they're doing, and not juggle frantically with hymnbook, purse, church envelope or even cheque book.

So – to return to the main thread – our giving starts with us. With our need as Christians to express tangibly how much we appreciate all that God has done for us, and continues to do in our lives. As the old 'General Thanksgiving' on the Book of Common Prayer puts it, 'we bless thee for our creation, preservation, and for all the blessings of this life; but above all for the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory....'

Those few, wonderfully balanced phrases, point to the extraordinary, prodigal love of God. His immensely generous grace, undergirds our human existence, and also – as we know as Christians - guarantees our experience and hope that we can enjoy life with him now and for ever. All this, despite huge limitations and failures in our own love. Giving generously back to God out of what he has, after all, given to us in the first place, is but a pale reflection of his limitless generosity to us, good things 'poured into our laps, pressed down, shaken together, running over', as Jesus puts it in the Gospels.

So Christian stewardship, Christian giving, is about our seeking to become a little bit more like God, the reckless giver. As a true act of worship it can't be an afterthought; it can't be a matter of the small change of our lives.

That's why Christians are encouraged to give sacrificially, proportionately, regularly, with commitment. Not simply so that the Church Treasurer knows enough about what's coming in to budget in advance – desirable though that is. But rather because worship, including worship in this tangible form, should be woven into the very fabric of our grateful lives.

What it will mean for each of us to give sacrificially, proportionately and with commitment will vary -because we are all different, and our circumstances are different. Many Christians like to think of some variation on the Tithing of the Old Testament – perhaps sharing a tenth of their income between church and charities, perhaps calculating their income on the basis of what is liquid and disposable - after housing costs, for example. But this sort of scheme is not for everyone. If you share your life and your finances with someone who isn't a Christian, you may not be able to argue for giving like that. If your means are very limited, it might not be right for you to think of pledging as much as a tithe or a half-tithe. If you already give materially in other less obvious ways –

for example, through what you contribute to church social events or charitable fundraisers – it can be right to bear all this in mind as you pray and make your financial pledge before God. On the other hand, if you are very comfortably off, you may feel that a tithe would not be a really sacrificial return to God and that you can afford more. He it is who knows all your circumstances, and all the secrets of your heart. What he desires above all is not your possessions, but the ‘you’ that they represent in worship.

I think you will have gathered by now the sense in which this Stewardship Sunday is not an occasion like our annual Michaelmas Letter, sent round the whole parish. I am asking you – asking myself - to consider giving to the church, and thus to God - not out of general sympathy and affection for St Mark’s, but out of definite Christian commitment. I am not telling you of all the things the church does with your money, and the needs it has – but asking you to review your life, your desire to grow into God’s generosity, your desire to become more like Christ, who ‘though he was rich, for our sake became poor’.

Giving to God through the church is an act of trust. Of course our accounts are open and inspected, and our policy with money can be questioned at the P.C.C. and Annual Church Meeting. In that sense, Christian giving through the church is not a matter of blind trust. But it is a matter of trust that the church, not only the parish church but also the diocese and the national church, to which we contribute, are indeed instruments of God’s purpose. It is a matter of trust to say, ‘If through our giving this particular church finds it has an excess above what it needs, the redirection of that excess to purposes beyond this parish will be glorifying to God.’ Sometimes Christians feel they can only entrust their money to their own particular congregation; they mistrust wider bodies, and feel that they don’t share adequately the theology that they think is right.

This I find very sad when it happens among Anglicans. For we are a church which wants to foster mutuality of support and trust among all its members. Charity may begin at home – in the home parish – but if it is mature charity, it shouldn’t stay there, but reach out to wider needs. We have to trust our wider church structures to make mutuality real, and to allocate from the excess of some to the need of others. We are one body – and when one church or parish struggles, whether we know it or not, we are all injured.

So I ask you today, if you are on the Electoral Roll of this Church, to take home a letter from the narthex addressed to you, and to make a fresh consideration of your Christian giving as a form of your worship and love. It’s a good thing to do annually. (Sometimes, as circumstances reduce, you may have to use such a review to make a reduction in your giving. – God knows.) If you’ve made such a review recently, don’t feel that you have to do it again today. But I shall be asking you again every year, around this time to make such a review. And I shall not be ashamed to do so. Because this is a spiritual issue. And we choose this time of year for Stewardship Sunday because it falls a month or more after the financial year has changed – and the thought is that people may have had time to see in their pensions or pay cheques what the consequences of new rates of pay and taxation are going to be for them. But it’s also good to be doing it today, because this is the day traditionally known as Rogation Sunday – a day of prayer for God’s blessing on the material circumstances of our lives (rooted in the agricultural tradition of praying for a good harvest). Asking – thanking – giving. They all go together in the Christian life. They all express our trust. They all express our joy in God. They all express our worship.