

VISION FOR GIVING

Introduction:

Thanks for the welcome and hosting this 'Vision for Giving' launch presentation. The Diocese of St. Albans has been running with the 'Vision for Action' initiative now for three years and it's been encouraging to see a number of exciting projects developing across the Diocese under that umbrella.

When we launched 'Vision for Action', we closed the presentation with these words:

- Vision without action is merely a dream
- Action without vision passes the time
- Vision with action can change the world

The purpose of this evening is to focus on the 4th aim of 'Vision for Action', namely, 'to strengthen the commitment to stewardship amongst clergy and laity...' under the title 'Vision for Giving' – our project for autumn this year.

First, by way of introduction, I want to say that I believe that Christian giving is an essential part of a fully rounded Christian discipleship - just as much as prayer, or worship, or reading the Bible, or fellowship with each other, or service in the community. It's part of what a Christian is.

Then secondly by way of introduction, I think that we sometimes preach about giving as if once a good chunk is given, then God doesn't much care what you do with the rest of the riches with which he has blessed you. But the steward has to render an account for everything entrusted to him - not just a proportion of it. So whatever else I go on to say today is in this context - God will require from you and from me an account of our stewardship for all we have.

The third thing I want to say by way of introduction is that when I'm talking about giving, I mean total giving, not just your giving through the Church. Many of you, I know, will have regular giving set up with Missionary Societies and relief agencies such as Oxfam or Christian Aid, etc., and I'm referring to all that as well as what you give simply through the church.

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

1. Why should we give?

There are two broad motives for giving in Scripture - both are rooted in God himself.

(a) God's grace

Grace is one of those religious words which has a much richer and deeper meaning than we find it easy to express. It's basically God's unmerited favour towards us; it's his unconditional love for mankind. Supremely this grace; this unmerited favour is seen in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Paul, without actually using the name of Jesus, sums it up thus: quote v 15.

There can be nothing more undeserved than that the God of all creation should come and live among people like you and me in order to open up the way back to himself. And if the amazing gift of Jesus Christ wasn't enough, then the gift of his life as

the price of our forgiveness must surely be the supreme act of selfless generosity. What greater motivation then for our giving to God than that God first gave himself to us?

(b) God's gifts

Alongside that supreme gift of God, there are also the many blessings he pours out upon us materially. St. Paul was aware of this: 'You will be made rich in every way, so that you can be generous on every occasion...' 2 Cor 9:11. God has blessed us richly with money and goods and food and drink. Our trip to Africa - bringing home to us even in an area with no actual starvation, just how little people have compared with us

I see no-one here:

- poorly clothed;
- who isn't going to have another meal today
- who hasn't a roof over their head.

Just by an accident of birth - or the grace of God - you were born here rather than in Africa or parts of Asia.

God's gifts to us are a tangible motivation to be generous in return. So two motives for our giving then - God's grace to us and God's gifts to us.

2. How should we give?

St. Paul outlines three attitudes which should typify a Christian's giving.

(a) Generously

We give generously because God has been so generous towards us. Your giving and mine shows just how much or how little we are grateful to God for all he has given us (And that's a challenging thought in itself.)

Something which follows from the fact that giving is an expression of gratitude is that giving is therefore always part of Christian commitment. We don't just give when there is a specific need to give to - but we are always generous in our giving, because God is always generous in his.

If your church were to find itself a benefactor who said he or she would pay all the bills - 'If the roof needs fixing, I'll fix it; if the boiler breaks down I'll renew it; if the Parish Share is due, I'll pay it' and so on - that shouldn't stop our giving. It would just enable the church to be more generous in turn in outward giving or would enable us to give in other directions. Giving generously, as far as Christian stewardship is concerned, is not about responding to need - it's about responding to generosity - God's generosity towards us.

So we should give generously but what that means for each individual, of course, will vary from person to person and from one set of circumstances to another. In Luke's gospel, we read the story of Jesus and the disciples watching people coming and offering their gifts at the Temple. The rulers of the people were putting hundreds of pounds into the treasury - but that was hardly generous in Jesus' eyes. He knew they had thousands left. Then a widow comes and puts in two small coins but they were 'all that she had', says the scripture. I'm not sure what that was, but I take it to be her income for a whole week. And Jesus knew what she had left. That, says Jesus, is true generosity.

After all, generosity is measured by what you have left after you have given, not by the amount you give. We need to remember that the so-called widow's mite was a

vast sum - for her - not a small one. What matters is that she was generous; Jesus saw and Jesus knew. When we are giving, we too need to be aware of the eyes of our Lord - he sees; he knows; he judges.

What would his comment be on your giving; on mine; as he watches us put our offering in the plate each Sunday? We should give generously.

(b) Freely and cheerfully

Quote v 7. This is a very important aspect of giving. Have you looked at people when the plate comes round, or they put their offerings on the plate as they come into church? They don't look very cheerful! But it should be something which we are delighted to be able to do.

Also, says St. Paul, it should be done freely. Maybe you think I'm out to compel people to give more than they can afford or want to give. But not so - I'm only interested in people sorting out their giving before God, so that they give with a great sense of rightness about what they doing; a sense of joy and a sense of thankfulness. I want you to be able to put your hand on your heart and say 'I know that I am right in my giving before God, because I've prayed about it and thought about it before him.'

Giving should be free and cheerful - no compulsion or pressure. But, as St. Paul in 2 Cor and Jesus in the story of the widow's offering make clear, there is a right time to challenge Christian people to put their house in order. We should give freely & cheerfully. If you're right with God about your giving, you can smile when you put your gift on the plate!

(c) Proportionately

There is another lesson both from this chapter in 2 Corinthians and from the gospel story. God doesn't expect us to give what we don't have. He expects us to give in proportion to our wealth and to our income.

What mattered to Jesus, as he and his disciples watched the people offering their gifts, was this - was that person's gift in proportion to their wealth? In one sense the woman got it out of proportion - in the generous direction - & Jesus loved her for it.

But many - maybe most - of those offering then - and, I guess, many, if not most, of us today are offering gifts out of proportion the other way. Like the rulers Jesus observed, our gifts are peanuts compared to our wealth; compared with our income; and compared with what we spend on ourselves - on luxuries, not necessities. Let's try to get our giving in proportion, therefore - in proportion to the amount we have and in proportion to the amount we spend on ourselves. (For example, how much does what we give per week compare with what we might spend on a ticket to watch Luton or Watford or to go to the cinema to see a film?)

If you are persuaded of proportionate giving, the next question is, 'What proportion should it be? Clearly it's going to be different for different people. If you are on the basic State pension of (say) £75 p.w., a proportion of 10% leaves you £67.50 to live on. That seems out of proportion to me.

But if you're on £500 p.w. a proportion of 10% means £450 left. And if someone is on £100,000 a year (and there are people in our churches on that figure) they'd be left £90,000 left to live on - and that strikes me as out of proportion the other way. You see what I'm driving at. The logic of this is that the proportion we give will also be in proportion to our income.

To suggest someone on £75 p.w. might give the biblical tithe of 10% might be a real hardship, but for someone on £100,000 a year it would be a drop in the bucket. As with the story of Jesus watching the people giving at the treasury, it's what you're left with that indicates how generous you've been.

(d) By budgeting

So what I want to encourage every Christian person to do is to budget for their giving; because if it isn't part of your budget like the electricity or gas or food or the car, then you certainly aren't in any sense being generous. I believe it should be the first call on a Christian's money, not the small change at the end.

I remember folk of my Grandparents' generation having jam jars on the mantelpiece into which the wages were divided. A pot for the electric; a pot for the rent; a pot for food; and so on. I want you to have a mental pot labelled 'giving' in the same way as you budget for the other expenses of life.

If you're not budgeting for your giving, then it'll take a low place in your priorities. It'll be tipping God rather than a proportionate thanksgiving. How should we give? Generously, freely and cheerfully; proportionately, and therefore budgeted.

3. Where do we go from here?

(i) To put our own house in order

I want to encourage everyone to budget a proportion of income for giving; to budget a proportion that you have prayerfully and carefully worked out in the sight of God. If you haven't done so already, resolve to get yourself sorted out, so you can put your hand on your heart and be able to say, 'I know that I am right with God about my giving'. And it will be different for each one of us.

For some there may need to be a major rethink and that major rethink may well be painful at first, but the joy and the excitement of being generous far outweigh the tiny sacrifices that may have to be made to start giving realistically.

O, you do know, don't you, that God is not subject to UK income tax? Don't make him pay it! If you pay Income tax you really ought to be giving under Gift Aid. If you pay tax at all, one signature on the Gift Aid form is all your church needs to increase your gift by around 25%. And you're not even committed to the same amount each year. Also included are any one-off gifts you might make too.

(ii) To address the issue of giving in our churches

If you never heard a sermon on prayer, or on the teaching of Jesus, or on the call to service, you'd think it strange, yet, as I said earlier, stewardship is just as much part of Christian discipleship, but many of our churches never hear a sermon on it.

I would like to encourage every church represented here to teach at least once a year about stewardship of the good gifts God has given us. Some churches make it an annual event; when I was a parish priest, we had a Recommitment Sunday every year in November, when people were invited to think through their commitment to all aspects of our discipleship including our giving.

Those of us here tonight have a special responsibility towards our churches. We need to help all our members to face up afresh to the challenge of giving.

(iii) To make use of the resources available

There is a wealth of resources available to help you in this task. Each one of you will go home with a pack tonight to help you either make a start on this with your churches, or to further resource what you are already doing. Please, please therefore, go home and think and pray about your response, and then think and pray how to help your churches to respond joyfully to this challenge too.

Conclusion:

So, get real about your giving and get real about your church's giving:

- real in relation to your income
- real in relation to what you spend on you
- real in relation to the needs of the world
- real in relation to God's goodness to you.

May God bless you all richly through *your* stewardship of *his* money.