

Stewardship talk

Yours Lord is the greatness, the glory the power... I always start a talk on stewardship with the Offertory Prayer, as it comes directly from the Bible. It is from Chronicles 29. Chronicles 28 and 29 are the passage where King David announces Solomon as his successor and instructs him to build the great Temple, which God did not allow David to build as he was a soldier - a Temple David could never have entered anyway, because of the blood on his hands. In the prayer, David, who started life a pauper and became very rich, acknowledges that he came into the world with nothing, will leave with nothing and everything he had whilst here came from God. It takes us back to Genesis and is one of the themes of the Old Testament.

There are 2300 verses in the Bible which talk about money, possessions and stewardship, and less than a quarter of that number that talk of love, faith and prayer.

For my Lenten task I couple of years ago I decided to do some revision and read all the major passages on stewardship. It is interesting how the stewardship themes ring out throughout the Bible, rather than in each part, which is the picture if you read the Bible conventionally. So here are some reflections.

There are 3 main themes. The first I have already covered, i.e. everything comes from God. The second is that God is entitled to the First Fruits of the harvest; this is endlessly mentioned in the Old Testament. The third is tithing: in Leviticus we hear '10% of everything you have is mine sayeth the Lord whether it be the fruit from your trees or the harvest from your fields'. It was to be taken to the Temple and if you could not get to the Temple you had to turn it into gold and each third year go to the Temple, buy grain and give it to the priests.

I think it helps to know the purpose of the tithe: it was to maintain the clergy and support those who did not have land, the Priests, strangers, visitors, the sick and the elderly - a sort of model for the welfare state.

So turning to Jesus, he only mentions the tithe briefly once, but he drove the money changers from the Temple because they were cheating people paying their tithe. Two thirds of his parables have a stewardship message, made all the more powerful when linked back to the Old Testament . The widow who gave her mite to the Temple was probably entitled to alms from the Temple. The Good Samaritan, my favourite story, was a visitor - again probably entitled to food - but he used his own time, talents and money to help the injured man. The message from Jesus to the Jews was therefore very strong, in that they had to change their petty rules and do things differently and look after one another.

In the New Testament Paul is the main evangelist we hear, and he talks a lot about money. Why? Probably because he can. Whilst a lot of the early evangelists were sponsored by a rich benefactor, Paul was a tent maker and earned his living wherever he went; he could therefore say what he liked. In his letters to the Corinthians there are two great passages on money. He wrote praising God for giving the Macedonians the grace to give sacrificially. Note: he praised God not the Macedonians, which takes us back to the first theme, 'all things come from God'. Secondly we have the often quoted passage, 'each of you should give a sum of money, each week, to the work of the church, according to your abilities.' This is taken often out of context because we ignore the next passage, when Paul says, 'to save you the burden of raising a large sum when I arrive... each of you.....' This is when the collection was born.

Paul plainly was expecting to receive the money anyway, but was suggesting a different way of collecting it. Why? Well Corinth was probably the wealthiest place in the Roman world: a trading port said to have more slaves than Rome. They could afford to give, but they probably collected their port duties and fees daily,

therefore using an agricultural tithe was no longer practical. Hence Paul solved the problem. Incidentally, he did not want the money for himself but to help other churches in financial difficulties - the principal of mutual support on which the Parish Share is paid today.

Where does that leave us? A few statistics: average giving per regular giver in Coventry Diocese is £9.38 per week or 3.7 % of average income (this comes from postcode stats). General Synod recommends we pay a minimum of 5% to and through the church and we then can give the remainder of our tithe to Christian Charities. Some debated at Synod that as our taxes pay some of the things the tithe was for, so we should take that into account. My own view is that as we are all at different stages on our faith journey we should periodically **prayerfully and carefully** review our giving of our time talents and money, act upon our decision and then get on with our lives.

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