

# A generous church

Sermon message Stewardship Sunday October 4<sup>th</sup> 2015 by Rev Derek Lightbourne

Keynote Bible passages: 2 Corinthians 9.6 – 15, Acts 2.42 – 47, Mark 12.41 - 44

At the recent Order of St Luke National Conference there was a speaker on the subject of change. This was in the context of the Order seeking to find opportunities to expand its ministry. Thus to pray for people's healing not only of ones in the church also to ones in need in wider society. This got me thinking about change in the church. Certainly there is a parallel movement here to be more intentional in mission, taking the gospel message beyond the church not only in speaking but in practical ways.

Taking a historical perspective we have witnessed much change in our church in the last 50 years. One can recall worship and the Bible read in the older language. The place of women in church activity and leadership is another change. Who would have thought we would have a bishop who has dreadlocks and mostly is in sandals? My early memory of bishops was of wearing gaiters and addressed with a sense of awe – Bishop Norman for example. Whilst we might have thought this has been big change in 50 or so years, may I contend that there's been a similar period in the history of the church where change was even more radical. Take those earliest days from round 30 AD and Jesus' death and resurrection. From a fledgling group of 11 apostles and 'some women' (as Luke tells us) devoting themselves to prayer to significant growth in numbers and spreading round the Mediterranean world in the first 50 years. We know about this from Luke's account and the correspondence we know as the New Testament. Reflecting back I am amazed how the church then got it together so remarkably. Thus Luke described the earliest church 'devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common, they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need...they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.....as we read in Acts 2.

1) This sermon is entitled '*A generous church.*' Generosity was a mark of the early church. We read of Barnabas early on selling property and bring the proceeds to the apostles. Others also so there wasn't a needy one among them. Then in response to a prophecy by Agabus on a famine soon to occur 'The disciples determined that, according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea...' (Acts 11.28).

Fast forward some 30 years and the church had spread into Greece. Paul had visited the city of Corinth and sent two letters including the passage being today's epistle reading. A topic in the letter was generosity. Paul writes of the generosity of the Macedonian Christians who while suffering their own affliction

had 'overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part'. Several times he mentions generosity – 'a generous undertaking, and the generous act of Jesus 'who though he was rich became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich'.

- 2) A fair balance. Then he gets to an issue which is also contemporary, *the balance between personal abundance and other's needs*. We sure know in these days. Increasingly it seems there is a gap between those who have and those who have less, and migrants who have nothing. Whether it is a phone appeal or people standing at the entrance to supermarkets or a letter in the post, we sure know there's need out there. What is good though from the passage is that Paul recognises there being 'a fair balance.' Thus to have enough to provide for family and self, and then what we might give away. It is in that context may I suggest that we might regard our giving to the church. Paul quotes 'as it is written, 'the one who had much did not have too much and the one who had little did not have too little.' This illustrates the story Jesus told in the gospel of the woman who gave very generously. (Mark 12).

A couple of weeks ago on the theme of St Matthew I drew attention to the collect prayer which comes with a caution: 'free us from all possessiveness and selfish love of money.' Taking that to heart helps us to establish priorities in our attending to the balance St Paul writes of.

- 3) In the excerpt we heard read Paul refers to another aspect of generosity. He observes an outcome is of *being blessed by God* and the blessing that is for others. 'God is able to provide you with blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.....you will be enriched in every way by your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God. ..' For me what I have discovered with generosity is that in giving one doesn't notice being more out of pocket. Somehow ends still meet. And that is the balance St Paul writes of and God blesses the action. Thus in giving I do not feel reluctant or under compulsion. Being human though on one occasion of giving quite an amount to a couple who had huge expenses incurred because of an accident and in that I never received thanks. I had to search my own thoughts of resentment and realise the action was in the giving, as I believe prompted by God, and that was sufficient. This didn't put me off – another instance of this happened last year with that tragic plane crash over Ukraine where a young New Zealand man was killed, leaving his wife and two pre-school children. Rob had been a member of the youth group and musician when I was at Johnsonville parish. I felt led to give to a fund for the children, and this was not only appreciated, it brought blessing to the family, and indeed to me.

In summary then, St Paul is right as he suggests of the believers that 'each one' gives as you have made up your mind. It's my conviction that St James Parish exercises responsibility with what is given, for mission and ministry, in the parish and giving to needs beyond the parish. If one includes giving to the ministry of the diocese, and mission overseas that is well in excess of 10%. We can today be thankful as was St Paul for the gift of generosity among us. And we do surely receive God's blessings, as a church and in our own life.