

God's abundant generosity

Sermon message by the Rev Derek Lightbourne
Stewardship Sunday All Saints' 2018

Keynote Bible readings: 2 Corinthians 8.7-15

When preparing sermons on aspects of the life of the early church I really like looking at the *context* in order to more discover the purpose of what has been written. Then to consider its relevance for today. So, it is with the first reading of this morning, selected obviously for the example of generosity for which St Paul is commending the Christian church in Corinth.

1) This letter was written around year 60 and by this time Christianity had spread to Greece and neighbouring Macedonia with the formation of churches in these places. The churches in Macedonia had been through a time of affliction (we're not told what it was) and yet had been generous in an appeal for helping the church in Jerusalem. Earlier Agabus had prophesied a severe famine in the time of Emperor Claudius and this prompted sharing (Acts 11.27). So that may have been the reason. Paul commends the 'wealth of generosity' of the Macedonians to the Corinthian church.

Furthermore, he draws from *Jesus' own nature* as being an example of generosity. Paul reminds them of Jesus who was 'rich, yet became poor so that by his poverty you may become rich'. This has reference to Jesus in Philippians 2: 'who though in the form of God, emptied himself,humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.....therefore God highly exalted him...' Thus, this being a generous loving action based on Jesus' own self-giving life.

By now it's time to share the theme – **God's abundant generosity**.

Generosity may I suggest, it is an aspect of God's very nature. Just as is love, as we acknowledge God is love.

How this links with our being generous goes right back to Genesis Chapter 1, the belief as humans were created, it was 'in the image of God.' That would suggest in our genes there is very much the capacity to be generous, just as God is generous. A little while back I came across this word of wisdom. 'God's way is the abundant way! There is no rationing in heaven, no skimping from the throne, no shortage of supply from the treasures of his mercies. God's life gushes forth from the well of salvation; spiritual blessing flows from rivers of living water; God's constant and consistent goodness is poured out as blessings are rained upon us.'

2) Second, this sets generosity in the context of **creation**. There's been differing translations of the Hebrew that humans are given dominion, rule, indeed stewardship over other parts of the created order. To exercise stewardship suggests a valuing, caring, that which has been provided in the context of living on this planet earth. Stewardship rather than dominion suggests we don't own it, but that we have been given it. Such is expressed in the prayer often said as gifts are offered to God: 'Blessed are you, God of all creation, through your goodness we have these gifts to share...and 'All that is in the heavens and the earth is yours Lord, and of your own we give you.'

May I also suggest this is closer to what I understand being Maori belief, of what we have is for the common good. In this sense we don't *own* what we have – it is all of God, from God, and indeed for God. So, our offering is a token or symbol responding to God's provision. Furthermore, bearing all this in mind, it is something

we *want* to give, to offer to God. Perhaps that is what is behind Paul's writing, 'God loves a cheerful giver.'

3) Thirdly, there is the context of **church community**. Generosity in this setting is commended by St Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth. The churches of Macedonia were suffering a grievous time of adversity. Yet even in this they sought to help other believers in their 'ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.' Paul describes it as an act of the grace of God in their response. That would suggest it having a sacramental dimension.

At an individual level this also has application. Where there is generosity, there is blessing. I'm reminded of an instance of a parishioner in a previous parish who offered to help financially where there might be a specific need for the encouragement of mission. At the time the NZ Order of St Luke was planning to bring a Sri Lankan lay minister at a healing home in Colombo to be keynote speaker for a national conference. When I shared this with him the parishioner, he asked about Prasad Perera's wife. Funds weren't available to afford her airfare. On hearing this he went and got his cheque book and wrote out the amount covering her return airfare to New Zealand.

No wonder in instances of generosity St Paul wrote 'God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work....and'you will be enriched in every way for your great generosity which will produce thanksgiving to God.' No wonder Paul ascribes to God what is the nature of God – 'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!'

In my own parish ministry experience I discovered the truth of Paul's writing, as a stepping out in faith in giving through tithing (after tax), that where there is generosity 'the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.' Giving that way I found that I wasn't any less well off.

But here it is important to emphasize Paul's wisdom, 'each of you in (your giving) must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly nor under compulsion....' Hence, we refer to '*freewill* offering.' In other words, this is a personal decision based on one's circumstances. And where there's generosity there's no doubt 'the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also flows with many thanksgivings to God.' That's what I believe for our parish.

Fourthly and finally, how this might be determined is mentioned by St Paul in today's Bible passage, being described as achieving '*a fair balance*.' Paul is sensitive to people's personal needs and writes of giving: 'I do not mean there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need.' That's a helpful way may I suggest when we determine what to freewill give, be it to the church or to needy charities. My experience is that in the giving God does provide and we personally have enough. Just as its important to achieve a fair balance between spending and saving. Thus, in our generosity the words quoted by Paul may also apply: 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'

(Conclusion) That's a suitable way to conclude this sermon message.

In summary, God is by nature generous. Stewardship then is in the context of God's abundant generosity. Our capacity to be generous lies in our human nature, being made in the image of God. For:

'All we have is yours, Lord, and of your own we give you.'