

Today is the start of a month of Christian Stewardship here at St Michael's, it is a month where we will be encouraged to review how we are reacting to God's love for us, in the way that we give our time, our talents and our money in the service of God and of our neighbours. We are going to explore our response to God's love by using the Old testament reading from 1 Chronicles chapter 29, psalm 116 that we've just sung, and Mark's gospel chapter 12, and the theme is: 'Giving back to God.' All three readings are linked by a common thread, all three have something to say about our response to God's love, and with the fundamentals of giving back to God.

The first important message is in the first 9 verses of 1 Chronicles where a huge amount of Gold, silver and other valuables were given to God. The first 9 verses doesn't tell us who gave that huge amount of wealth, or how many people contributed to it, in this case it doesn't matter how much was given or the value of what was given the important thing is how it was given to God. When we give we must be like the people in verse 9 which reads, "Then the people rejoiced because these had given willingly, for with single mind they had offered freely to the Lord."

Jesus said as recorded in Matthew chapter 10 verse 8 these words, "Freely you have received, freely give." God loves a cheerful giver, St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians chapter 9 verse 7 reads, "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver." God gives his love unconditionally and we are to return his love unconditionally.

The second message is in the second half of our reading from 1 Chronicles which is a prayer spoken by king David and which reads, "For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you." These are the words we use when the donations to the church are brought to the altar during the 9.30 service, albeit a slightly different Bible translation. But the true significance of those words is that everything we think we own is in fact on loan to us as a gift from God, we brought nothing into the world, and we will take nothing out, everything we give to God he has given it to us first. Every relationship we have is a gift from God. My late wife Jill, my three children, my two Sons in law, and four grandchildren are a gift from God, and speaking for myself, and I'm sure for most of you, our families are the real treasures that we have received from God. And I'm sure all of us, thank God continually for all the gifts we receive including the gift of health, wealth, and happiness, for which at 87 I'm exceedingly grateful.

The psalm we sang is also relevant to our giving back to God, the psalm speaks of what we should do in return for all the gifts the Lord has given us, verse 12 reads, "What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me." Jesus answered that question for us when he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" That is what we are to do in return for his love, we are to acknowledge his love by loving him and our neighbours as ourselves. But as Christians we are to go a step further, verse 17 of our psalm reads, "I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice." And that is what we are doing this morning at this service of Holy Communion offering our sacrifice of thanks and praise to God for all that he has given us and continues to give us.

Turning now to the scene when Jesus spoke the words of our gospel reading. In verse 38 just before our reading we are told that Jesus was speaking about the scribes to a large crowd

in the temple. Jesus started by saying, "Beware of the scribes." Jesus is talking of the men who are entrusted with teaching and leadership who have taken advantage of their positions, they focused on what they could get rather than what they could give, a very selfish place to be. They wore long expensive robes, they expected to be greeted with great respect when out walking, they expected people to stand aside when they walked by. and to have the best seats in the synagogue, We are told that they devoured widows houses which means that if a widow couldn't pay her way the scribes wouldn't hesitate to commandeer their houses. Many scribes acted both as lawyers and theologians, assisting people with financial as well as spiritual affairs.

These are temptations for everyone to be careful of. Who doesn't like special treatment? Who doesn't enjoy wearing expensive clothes? Who wouldn't enjoy the praise of others? But it is how we deal with it that counts. They were clearly despised by the people for the way they acted, and the way they lived, because when Jesus was criticising and ridiculing them in the temple, we are told in verse 37 before our reading, that the large crowd were listening to him with delight, clearly indicating their contempt of the scribes. We shouldn't of course assume that all scribes were bad people. Jesus had a conversation with a scribe in verse 34 whom he pronounced to be not far from the kingdom of God.

In contrast to the scribes who expected to be honoured and revered, Jesus taught his disciples to be servants. In chapter 9 verse 35 we read. "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all." In chapter 10 verse 45 we read, "For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." It is not only money we have to give joyfully but also ourselves in the service of others. The parable of the sheep and goats makes it clear, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Jesus' life contrasts dramatically with the scribes whom he was criticizing. Unlike them, Jesus dressed modestly and served the needs of humble people as he moved about from place to place.

When he finished talking to the crowd about the scribes he sat down opposite the treasury and just watched what was going on, and he watched people putting money into the treasury. The treasury consisted of several different metal boxes for different temple activities, and they donated to the treasury by dropping their money through a funnel into the box of their choice. This is similar to our treasury here at St Michael's where people, for example, donate specifically for the restoration of the spire or for the work of the family worker. Once the money has been allocated it cannot be used for anything else, whereas our Christian Stewardship money goes to the general fund and can be used for any and all our day to day expenses.

We are told that many rich people put in large sums of money, this raises the question how did Jesus know that they were putting in large sums of money. In Jesus' day there was no paper money only metal coins of different values and when you poured your large sums of money into the box it made a noise, and the greater the amount of money, the louder the noise. Now there was no one there from the temple treasury counting in the money or saying thank you to people, so everything that was given whether from the rich or the poor was given freely, so Jesus would be pleased that both the rich and the poor were supporting the work of the temple, not because they had to, but because they wanted to. And I'm sure that there was considerable satisfaction by some people by the amount of noise that was made when donating money. Which raises the issue of our motives for giving. God knows our hearts and it is important to give our talents, our time, and our money to the church and other charities for the right reasons, and the right reasons for the church is because of our

love for God and all he gives to us and does for us, and to other charities for compassion for those who they are trying to help.

And as Jesus was watching; a poor widow came and put two coins in the treasury, which together was worth about a penny; in this case there would have been no discernible noise and clearly Jesus saw her put the coins in. So, he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty.” When Jesus said that the rich had contributed out of their abundance he was not criticizing them in any way, he was merely saying that they were using money they did not depend on, whereas the widow’s offering was even larger because she had given money away on which she did depend. Jesus is teaching the disciples and us that it is not the amount of money given that is important, but rather the sacrifice made in the offering, whether it is our money we are giving or ourselves.

Revd. John White