

# **Stewardship Sunday**

**by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Exodus 35:4-9,20-29; Luke 16:10-13

## **Introduction: Two questions**

### **1. What do you give thanks for?**

When you give thanks to God for his blessings, what do you think about? And how often do you take time to count your blessings and thank God? Knowing I'd be preaching on this today, I took time this morning to list many of the blessing I've received. One of them is being part of this wonderful church, with so many people who give their time and money. Of course, we've all had difficult times in our lives, and some of you may be going through a difficult time now. But counting your blessings, even in the midst of trouble, can lift your spirits and put things in perspective.

### **2. An unexpected windfall**

Suppose you unexpectedly inherited, or won, a million pounds. What would you do with it? How much would you give away, and who to? Family members? Your favourite charity? St Michael's Church, maybe? Or would you spend most of it on a round-the-world cruise?

The point of the question is to help us become aware of what our priorities are, because how we spend our money is one good indicator of what we think is most important in life.

How we spend our time is another. For most of our adult lives most of us are working to earn money, so that we can provide for ourselves and our loved ones. But many of us have also had the privilege of doing work that gives us a sense of satisfaction and achievement. The choices we make about our work also reflect our priorities, for example, job satisfaction, higher earnings or a better work-life balance.

What about our leisure time? One of the things about many families in this area is that their children are always busy doing out-of-school activities – sport, dance, music or a combination of these. Developing our talents and abilities is all very good, but we also need time for entertainment and relaxation and quality time with our families. And time for prayer and worship.

## **Stewardship**

For Christians, all of these questions come under the heading of Stewardship – how we manage the time, talents and money that God has entrusted us with. Stewardship starts with a recognition that all we have ultimately comes from God. When we begin to acknowledge him as our Creator, Provider and Giver of good things, the way we think about our time, talents and money is infused with a sense of gratitude. When you are grateful, you are joyful. And when you *receive* gifts with gratitude, you begin to learn the joy of *giving*. In the words of Jesus, “It is more blessed to give than to receive<sup>1</sup>”, which can also be translated, “there is more happiness in giving than in receiving”.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20:35 NRSV

## The joy of giving

In today's Old Testament reading from the book of Exodus, Moses has been given instructions by God on how to make the Tent of Meeting, and all of its furnishings that would be used in worship.<sup>2</sup> Now it is time to carry out God's instructions, and he invites the people of Israel to contribute all the materials, and also their skills, to make everything. I chose this passage for our Stewardship Sunday because of one verse which was highlighted by Joshua Townson, the Generous Giving Adviser in Oxford Diocese in a recent seminar I attended. It's chapter 35 verse 21:

And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the LORD's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments.

The key phrase that stood out was "everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing".

The passage goes on to describe the various different things that the people brought, which reminds me of last week's bible passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, where Paul writes of the church being like a human body in which each of the members has a different function. The point is that each of us has something to contribute. What *you* can offer will be different from what *I* can offer, but everyone's contribution is important.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus chapters 25-31

## **The practical aspect**

A grateful and joyful attitude is the foundation of Christian giving. But God also expects us to be practical. Another word for stewardship is management, and management includes planning. The verses we heard today from Luke's gospel come straight after the rather confusing parable of the dishonest manager. But the main point Jesus was making is that God expects us to be wise and practical in managing our resources.

For example, if we need to replace our car, we work out what sort of car we need and what we can afford. If we don't have enough money available for the car we want, we may choose to sacrifice something else in order to find the money, for example by booking a cheaper holiday – or not having a holiday at all. Or we may consider a finance agreement, or leasing the car.

The same process is needed when it comes to giving, whether it's money or time. Both are finite resources. Having warm fuzzy feelings about God is all very well, but are we willing to plan our giving of time, talents and money so as to show God how important we think it is to worship him and to support the mission of the church?

Those of us who are responsible for the running of St Michael's need to be practical too. And so in the leaflet which has been given out over the past 3 weeks I have given some facts about the challenges we face as a church. On the money side, a small number of people are actually bankrolling St Michael's, and even so we are running at a deficit. As I mentioned in the leaflet, we need the average

giving per member to increase by £10 per month, from £38 per month to £48, in order to be running the church on a sustainable basis. Some, of course, would be able to contribute a lot more, and some less.

And on the volunteering side we are also short-staffed. So on this Stewardship Sunday we're inviting everyone who considers themselves members of this church to reflect on the contribution they are making. We need more volunteers, especially in the areas of pastoral care and work with children and young people, and we need someone to market the Pastoral Centre so we can get more income from that. But we'd love to hear from anyone who feels they can contribute in any area of church life, from cleaning the church to serving coffee to serving as churchwarden!

### **Obstacles to giving**

So in this affluent part of the world, where so many people have money, skills and time that they could offer, what are the things that are getting in the way of joyful giving? Here are four possibilities:

1. Some people haven't ever really understood the concept of Christian stewardship before. So I hope the leaflet and the sermons we've been having have helped you understand that being a Christian affects how we think about the whole of our lives, and how we offer back to God what he has already given to us.
2. Some people simply haven't been aware of what is needed to run a church in terms of volunteer time and money, or have assumed that there were already plenty

of people contributing. Again, I hope that's a little clearer now, but we can give more information if required.

3. Some people think that they've got nothing to contribute, or that what they have won't make any difference. But think back to the story of the poor widow who gave two small coins to the Temple treasury. Jesus said that she gave more than all the rich people. Think also of St Paul's analogy of the body. In a parallel passage in 1 Corinthians he says that "If the foot would say 'because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body."<sup>3</sup> Everybody has something useful to contribute. The church is a community, not a building or an institution, and each of us has something to offer to everyone else.
4. And finally, some people are still influenced by a worldly attitude to their time and money, and haven't understood Jesus' words from today's Gospel reading, that "you can't serve God and money". It's all too easy to get caught up in the world's desire for more wealth, and a so-called higher standard of living. Equally, we can get dragged into a compulsion to spend all our free time on ourselves. Both are forms of slavery, and prevent us from experiencing the joy of giving to others and to God. But if you suspect that your way of thinking has been influenced in this way, then help is at hand. There is a simple way to get free from the grip that money has on you: give it away! The same is true with time. When you

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:15 NRSV

see that your giving of money or time makes a difference to the lives of others, you get the satisfaction of knowing that in some small way you are helping to build the Kingdom of God. There is no better way of finding meaning in life than to submit every aspect of your life to the lordship of Christ – your work, your money, your time, your skills and talents, your relationships, your very self.

### **Responding to God's love**

Every week in this church we celebrate Holy Communion. This was at the centre of the life of the church from the very beginning, and it reminds us of why we are Christians at all. The word Eucharist means “thanksgiving”. By looking back to the Last Supper and the Cross and Resurrection, we are reminded of the sacrifice that Jesus made out of love for us, to take away our sins and to reconcile us to God. At the end of the service we say a prayer that says “we offer you our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice”, words that echo last week’s reading from the letter to the Romans.

Let’s make that offer of ourselves meaningful this morning, by responding to God’s love for us in practical ways. Many of you may have filled in the response form on the back of the Stewardship leaflet. If you haven’t, I’d like to invite you to do so now during the few moments of silence we have after the sermon. During the final hymn of this service, please bring up your form and put it in this box. Depending on what you write, someone will contact you to follow up on whatever pledge you decide to make. If you need another

form, please raise your hand, and one will be brought to you.

Thank you for your participation in the life and work of this church. Let me finish with some words of St Paul in 2 Corinthians:

<sup>6</sup> The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. <sup>7</sup> Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup> And 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.<sup>4</sup>

May God bless you as you respond to his love for each of us and all the world. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 NRSV