

Building Together a Generous Church

Matthew 6.19-33 2 Corinthians 8.1-7; 9.6-15

For those who don't know me, my name is Sammi Tooze and I am a Generous Giving Adviser in the diocese, and it is such a pleasure to be with you this morning as you begin your journey of generosity as a community, reflecting on what it looks like to build together in love, and responding to our blessings by becoming a gift and blessing to others.

So, why are we thinking about generosity? Giving generously is part of who we are both as human beings and as Christian people – it is that which expresses love, value and gratitude. As Christian people we begin here, because generosity springs from the attitude of a grateful heart, and the recognition that God first gives to us for our enjoyment. Giving becomes an act of thanksgiving in response to our faith. Historically the Church of England has found talking about giving a challenge, and I think it's because we have tended to communicate a very transactional and passive message about money, rather than focusing our hearts and minds on the core in which all our faith is grounded. When we begin here, generosity becomes the fruit of gratitude, and something which we feel called to naturally and gracefully, as opposed to being something we feel we have to do for the sake of keeping the church roof intact.

Whenever we reflect on a particular subject matter in the life of the church, it is usual to begin with scripture. In the case of giving, it is possible to read the entire bible as a narrative of giving – giving, generosity and gratitude is the second most commonly mentioned thing in the bible (and I'll tell you what the most commonly mentioned subject is in a moment!). In all this, the narrative we read is one of gift and grace, and we understand that generosity is in the nature of God. As human beings made in the image of God, generosity is therefore in our nature as well. One thing I like about this is that it broadens our horizons when we think about acts of giving, from something which may be a conscious act of giving, to one which is part of our everyday lives because it's part of who we are, as we express the nature of God to the world.

I said I'd come back to the most commonly mentioned thing in the bible – and some of you may have guessed that it is love. The biblical concepts of love and gift are inseparable. God loved, and therefore God gave – it's impossible to understand one without the other. And so because God's love is gifted love, our love needs to be expressed through giving as well. When we grow in our understanding about this, giving becomes something so beautiful and natural, something that brings us joy as givers as well as receivers because those acts of giving express something far greater than the act itself. A couple of weeks ago the world celebrated Valentine's Day – as someone who lives alone it can be a challenge listening to social media's stories which unintentionally emphasise that loneliness, and a friend of mine

came round to my house and a couple of others which a bunch of flowers saying that on this day of love, we give thanks for our friendships too. It was such a beautiful expression of generosity in simplicity which spoke far beyond the act itself, and both giver and receiver were blessed by the experience – this is what a community of generosity looks like. One of my favourites quotes about giving and love is by the nineteenth century preacher John Jowett who wrote,

“Cheerful giving is born of love. Giving is the language of loving – indeed it has no other speech. God so loved, that he gave! Love finds its very life in giving itself away. It’s only pride in possession is the joy of surrender. If love has all things, it yet possesses nothing.”

I love the imagery of giving as the language of loving, which spills out into the way each of us live our lives with those around us. This notion of cheerful giving is what we heard in this morning’s New Testament reading – one which many of us know well, and a passage which is possibly the most eloquent when it comes to unpacking the spirituality and culture of generosity in the bible. Crucially though, this passage also reminds us that giving is something which is grounded in our hearts – when reflecting on our financial giving to our local church, it is not something we do reluctantly or under compulsion, but acts of generosity which we give freely and gracefully because we are motivated by faith, and the outcome of what happens when we give. Paul writes of the churches in Macedonia, that they were “begging earnestly for the privilege of serving in this ministry to the saints”. They understood what Christian giving should look like, that it was their privilege in being the giver, and that they would be enriched through God by that generosity.

When we were planning this period of reflection on generosity at St Lawrence’s, you may have noticed that we have called it ‘Building Together’ – building together as a generous, loving, prayerful, outreaching community. Building together is key to anything we do, because it is in that togetherness that we can become the church that God calls us to be. As human beings we are created by a relational God who gifts both himself and people to one another – offering the very essence of relationship and community as a gift. In his essay ‘Bread for the Journey’, Henri Nouwen writes,

“Community is the fruit of our capacity to make the interests of others more important than our own.”

Building Together is just that – building a church of togetherness, one body in Christ, shining the light of Christ in darkened places, and being the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Building Together is about growing the gift of relationship with one another, nurturing one another in faith, and recognising that at the heart of all things is love. It through love that generosity is poured out on the world, and in times of crisis we see this most starkly – we saw it two years ago as our world first experienced lockdown as a response to keeping everyone safe during the first wave of the pandemic, and many people responded by giving themselves to help and support others in their local community.

As the atrocities of this week have unfolded in Ukraine, we see this again as many give to support those in need. In putting this sermon together, I know that nothing I can say will ever give justice to what is happening, nor do I have any wisdom in how each of us here can respond – but I do know that every response will be an act of love and generosity. I recently heard the Archbishop recall a visit he made to a friend in hospital – the friend said that whenever people from his church visited they said they'd been praying for him, but when his neighbours visited they said that they'd cut his lawn and taken the bins out. Of course, as Christian people we must ground ourselves in prayer, and we will be doing so as part of this service – but prayer must lead to loving action, responding to human need in loving kindness.

Responding to human need is part of what being a generous church looks like, building together a church which serves its community and the world around us by being the hands and feet of Christ. When we give financially to the life of the church we are doing just that, with a common vision, and knowing that community itself is one of the greatest gifts we have to offer. Money becomes the least interesting thing, but we feel drawn and moved to give it because of the vision of fruitfulness, the joy of belonging, and the heart for outreach and change which that giving enables. We are brought together in the way we express our love to one another, but also in what we are motivated to be and do together. Communities of God are grounded in the same things that God cares about, and should be known by the way that we approach and address these things as well – here in St Lawrence's that manifests itself in many ways including Little Steps, Open the Book, Messy Church, working with schools, visiting people and helping those on the threshold of exploring faith. With God, our purpose and priorities are the same, and this propels us into a collective response in generosity to the world.

In building in generously together, each taking it in turns to be both giver and receiver, we are also growing in Christlikeness. Giving is a ministry in itself, of which we all play a part. Giving is a very rich and beautiful activity – it is a confident, joyful, hope-filled expression of ministry. In ministering to each other, each from the riches we possess, we work together for the full coming of God's kingdom here on earth. Our acts of generosity are transformed as we ground them in love, as love transcends all things. The kingdom of God is close at hand as we meet with Christ in the face of others, and reveal the nature of God through our loving and generosity. Growing in Christlikeness is part of all our discipleship journeys, and something which we focus our hearts and minds on most particularly during Lent. This week we will be marking Ash Wednesday as the beginning of this year's season in which we are called into a period of internal examination, shining a light into the darker places of our lives, so that we can be changed – changed more into the likeness of our creator. How might it be if this Lent, rather than giving up chocolate or gin, that we instead commit ourselves to growing in Christ-like generosity? Perhaps to grow in the words we heard from 2 Corinthians

9 this morning, that we are to be enriched by our generosity, and that through humility that generosity points beyond itself to produce thanksgiving to God.

So when we think about our financial giving to our local church, let us focus our hearts and prayers on what that financial gift enables, thinking gracefully of the mission and outreach which is resourced by that financial giving. Let us reflect on our giving as an act of worship, an expression of love to God, his church and the people around us, as love in action, and gathering resources to be able to be the church that God calls us to be. Let us commit this season of Lent to growing in Christ-like generosity, and growing God's kingdom on earth.

Let us pray.

Loving and generous God,
we give thanks for your love
and gift of your present among us;
guide us in this coming season of Lent,
that we may open our hearts to grow in Christ-like generosity,
and build together the generous church you call us to be;
in the name of Christ,
Amen.

St Laurence's Church, Scalby
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