

Sermon for 4<sup>th</sup> February 2024 in Grenoble. Stewardship Sunday.

Readings: 2 Corinthians 8 v10-15 and 9 v 6-15

Mark 12 v38-44

Thank you, Allwell and Eric, for that helpful presentation regarding the situation here in Grenoble, as we plan and pray for a full-time chaplain here. Trust that God has great plans for his work here and trust that you can play **your** part in that work and witness.

Prayer is key – prayer for God’s guiding hand; prayer for the right person to come forward, prayer for yourselves that God will show you how you can play your part; prayer that you will find ways to be generous with your gifts and talents and time and money. If you don’t already do it, pray every day for God’s guidance for St Marc’s and for your part in it and you’ll be amazed at what God can do!

Along with prayer, has to come action and our readings today help us to think about our attitude to giving and the generosity that should follow.

In the gospel reading we heard Jesus talking to his disciples about generosity and giving.

He criticises those scribes who love to make sure everyone knows how important they are. By virtue of their status the scribes could expect to be respected and even treated reverentially by the ordinary people and would enjoy being part of the social life of the wealthy. But they are not all bad, as elsewhere Jesus meets Scribes and teachers of the Law who seem to be open to his message, and he even tells one of the Scribes that he was ‘not far from the kingdom of God’.

As a contrast to these grand leaders we have this widow, who is entitled to protection of these very church leaders. It was in their Law that they should care for widows and orphans. So, the image of religious leaders seeking honour and wealth at the expense of the widow is deeply shocking and it is a story that challenges those who practice injustice or even see injustice and do nothing about it.

Jesus is watching the people coming and going and putting their offering into one of the receptacles in the temple treasury. There were in fact 13 trumpet shaped receptacles for offerings of different types. Presumably

Jesus could see what money was about to be put into the collection box or else the person giving the money had to tell the priest how much they were putting in so that it could be recorded. Whatever the situation, Jesus knew what they were giving. We should not miss the significance of this. We sometimes speak of giving as our personal business and no one else's but we must not forget that God knows what we are giving, and we are accountable to him for the choices we make.

Mark paints a vivid word picture. Look at the language he uses: 'the crowd were putting in their money and many rich people **threw** in large amounts'.

To me, **throwing** it in rather implies an unthinking donation, maybe even an arrogant action; they don't have to think, because they know they can afford to live well without it, they just chuck in what they have decided to give. It would seem a lot of money to many, but it 'cost' them nothing because it wouldn't be missed.

But then we are introduced to one poor widow who '**puts** her money in'.

It sounds like a more thoughtful action. She **put** it in; she placed it carefully. The material needs of the widow do not disappear because she gives generously. She does not stop being poor or needy because she is generous. Rather, her personal generosity speaks of the generosity of God while the fact she is a 'poor widow' remains a challenge to others to 'act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6;8).

We may give generously of what we have, but we fail God when we turn a blind eye to injustice in the world.

Jesus calls his disciples to him and tells them that 'this woman has put more money in the treasury than all the others'. In other words, her generosity was more than all the others.

These wealthy givers gave much but gave from their surplus, retaining enough to live and, indeed, live well. By contrast the widow's gift has a sacrificial quality, coming not from her surplus but from what she needs to live.

It may have only been two small copper coins but for her it was sacrificial giving. By giving that money, she would have to go without something important that week. So, for her, it must have been a priority. She first gave her money to God and then lived on what was left.

We are seeing what St Paul would think of as proportional giving.

In the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, there was 'the Law of the tithe' in chapter 14 in which the Jewish people are commanded to set aside 10% of what they had. This seems to be a bit like a savings account and from that fund they were to give to the Temple priests, the Levites, who had no land of their own to provide for themselves.

Often people will consider what money they need for the week's food and other bills and then decide if they have any left for the church collection.

Whereas the principle of tithing is to decide first what you should be giving, and then live on the rest.

In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul, who was a converted Jew and therefore knew all about tithing, is talking along similar lines, about giving in proportion to what we have. We learn a lot from his advice.

As he travelled around the Mediterranean during the 50s AD, Paul heard about a severe famine affecting Jerusalem. So, he appealed to different churches to collect money to send to the church there.

He asked them to set aside a proportion of their income each week which would get a better result than a single, one-off appeal.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, he tells them that that is what the Galatians are doing and they are much poorer than the Corinthians.

In his second letter, he sends a much longer explanation of the principles of Christian generosity and the grace of God. This time he compares Corinth's first effort to those of the churches in Macedonia even though they too were suffering extreme poverty. The Macedonians gave sacrificially because they saw a need in Jerusalem and felt they had to respond to it.

We see a bit of peer pressure here. The Corinthians would think if Macedonia and Galatia can do it, then we must not be out done. We can do it too!

In Paul's first letter, Paul had instructed the church in Corinth to set aside an amount of money, in keeping with his or her income; so that time and energy would not be wasted with collections when Paul arrived to take the money to Jerusalem. In his second letter, the one we heard earlier, Paul urges them to continue this act of love.

Paul helps us to think through the principles on Christian giving and so I have summarised his teaching. (Slides on PowerPoint)

Firstly, we are to give generously because of God's love for us. As the example of the Macedonians shows, generosity does not always arise out of wealth, but sometimes out of distress or poverty. Christian giving may involve giving beyond our means.

Next, giving should be a privilege and not a burden. We need to change our mind set surrounding giving to God.

God loves a cheerful giver. We are to give what we have decided to give, freely and cheerfully, not reluctantly or under impulsion.

Whatever our gifts; faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness and love; whatever we excel in, that should be matched by the grace of giving .

Generous giving arises out of following the self-giving example of Jesus (5) Although he was rich, for our sake he became poor and paid the ultimate price of death on the cross for us.

To give sparingly is to receive sparingly; to give generously is to receive generously. Paul had in mind both spiritual and material blessings.

Christians can trust God. To hang on tightly to our present possessions is a failure to trust God to supply our needs and to miss out on the liberating experience of his care.

And finally, giving generously brings about a double blessing. Giving causes thanksgiving. It not only supplies the needs of others but causes them to give praise and thanks to God and to pray for us; so, both giver and receiver are blessed.

Living a life of gratitude is a response to what God has given us, and it leads to us giving of ourselves, our time, our money, our possessions. Not as a duty but a joy, because we are in a virtuous circle of grace and giving.

As we consider our attitude to gratitude, let us pray that God will reshape our understanding of who he is and what he has done for us.

Be excited about the future here in Grenoble. God can do great things and he needs **you** to commit cheerfully to being part of the action!

Let us commit all this to God and say the following prayer together:

(Slide 2)

Let us pray:

**Our Church is made up of people like us.  
We make it what it is.**

**It will be filled with inspiring worship if we are there and ready to meet with you, Lord.**

**It will be a community where disciples are made if we are willing to grow in love for you and for one another.**

**It will grow if our vision is for a welcoming church, that makes a real difference to people's lives.**

**Help us to be more generous, to serve you better and to break down the barriers which prevent us loving and serving and giving wholeheartedly.**

**Lord, with your help, we dedicate ourselves to the task of being all the thing you want us and this church to be.**

**Amen.**

