

Generosity

The happiest people I know are also the most generous people I know. Their generosity overflows into almost every aspect of their lives. They look for the good in others. They give freely of themselves in conversation and time. They possess a lightness of spirit. It is as if they don't hold back on anything.

They are not hoarders. They have that quiet quality of being able to lose and let go of things without too much of a fuss.

If I was to ask you "How would you define God?" we could alight on the quote of St John: "God is Love". But the word that comes closer to this love is surely 'generosity'. God is generous.

In everything we attribute to God we see immense acts of generosity. The superabundance of creation around us, the infinite variety of faces and personalities, the wonder of human love and creativity, the miracles of modern science.

If we are honest, we already have what we need and more. When we read the Gospels we see in the person of Jesus someone alive with the generosity of God. Turning water into wine at a wedding is a sign of this super-abundance.

The gospels are a story about the triumph of generosity. Generosity is at the heart of the Christian life and we are called to respond to the generous God by being generous ourselves, caught up in His spirit of self-giving.

It is often through our generosity that we are able to bring the love of God to life in others. The generosity of a forgiving heart, the generosity of a listening ear. These are real and tangible ways that God's kingdom breaks in and, for a moment, we capture a glimpse of the life of God.

The spirit of generosity always begins with gratitude. During these summer months we could spend some time cultivating a grateful awareness of all the blessings that God has bestowed upon us.

Sometimes I hear a remark by a parishioner how blessed their lives are. That's a wonderful state to be in, a sense of how blessed they are. When I ask what these blessings may be, they are the smallest, quietest of things, but they recognise them, they see them in a different light, as gifts, signs, tokens of God's care and love for them.

It is a humbling experience. I realise that I have so much to be grateful for, but too often I take these blessings for granted, or fail to reflect on them.

One of my leading indicators of my own spiritual health is whether or not I am in a place of gratitude. When I get in a bad mood, or become overwhelmed by a situation, I have usually lost the perspective of thanksgiving. Next time you are in a bad mood, ask yourself whether or not you are in a place of gratitude.

It is impossible to be grateful and in a bad mood at the same time. By stepping away from gratitude we become restless and discontented. And our world wants us to be drawn into a conversation about things we don't have, to foster a kind of awareness of lack. But God is always inviting us into a conversation about what we do have, and are we cherishing those realities that He has given to us? And are we free to share them with others?

In this morning's Gospel, we hear about the builder of barns. Here is a man who is simply placing his identity, his sense of self and his security in his possessions. We all do it. How much we do it will reveal how little we trust in the providential care of God for us.

Of course, we must be prudent with what we possess, but we must ask ourselves who really is being possessed?

In the film, Schindler's List, when the war is over Oscar Schindler and his wife are fleeing. Having saved so many Polish Jews from death, he is now hunted himself. He had spent his time purchasing workers for his factory to save them from certain death. It is the final scene that is so moving, as he is walking towards his car surrounded by the eleven-hundred grateful Jews whose lives he saved. Now that it is over, he comes to the realisation that he could have done more, that he could have saved more lives. He said "I could have sold the car. Why did I keep the car? I could have got two more people." He pulls a gold pin from his jacket and says "This is gold, I could have sold it, I could have got another person."

Then Itzhak Sterne, the Jew who worked with Schindler, grabs hold of him and says "You did so much. Look around you. Eleven-hundred people are alive because of you."

Schindler was by no means a perfect man, but what he did was heroic. He went to extraordinary lengths, risking his own life to save Jewish lives, and at the end he still knew in his heart he could have done more.

We cannot do everything and we are not as heroic as Schindler, but it would be a shame to come to the end of our lives and realise that we could have done so much more for others.

A spirituality of generosity can reach deeply into every corner of our lives. We could practise being generous with our praise and appreciation. Generous with encouraging each other.

I am always amazed at the extraordinary self-giving of those who serve coffee at Pret A Manger, just opposite Victoria Station. They give of themselves with such an enthusiastic delight that for a brief moment I feel I am in a parallel universe. They brighten up my day and put a smile on my face and they do this over and over again.

We have a God who just longs to out-do our generosity. Jesus speaks of a return of a hundredfold in this world. An overflowing.

We could ask ourselves three simple questions: What's holding us back from being more generous with our time for others? What's holding us back from being more generous with our talents which we could share with others? What's holding us back from being more generous with our treasure, which perhaps we hoard and hold tight to ourselves?

We tell ourselves, the problem is, life gets in the way. The demands on our time, talent and treasure are enormous. Nurturing relationships requires endless amounts of time. Unexpected financial needs and dilemmas always seem to be popping up. It's not that we don't want to be generous, it's just that life seems to be pulling in many directions all the time. Generosity, however, can begin with small steps, small acts of generosity. But the extraordinary thing is how things can easily be turned on their head. The Christian's life flows from a paradox that it is in giving that we receive.

And the extraordinary thing is, if we are generous with our resources we discover that our hearts expand in generosity as well.

Being generous is not just something that we do, it is a part of who we are. Jesus could not be but generous, because He was rooted in the generosity of God's life.

With every passing day, God will be inviting us to live a more generous life, calling us to switch the focus off ourselves and on to others. The more we are mindful of how much we have received, the more we are inclined to look for opportunities to give. And it is by those acts of spontaneous generosity in whatever form they express themselves, that

we are living out from God's own generous spirit. Or, as this morning's Gospel puts it, we become rich towards God, expressing His qualities.