

God's Indescribable Gift – Stewardship 2016

Third Sunday Before Advent – 6th November 2016

ON A DESERT ISLAND

Two members of St Michael's Barnes were shipwrecked on a desert island.

One of them starts to panic – *“We're going to die! There's no food here and no one will find us!”*

But the other one remains totally calm and says, *“I earn over a million pounds a year.”*

“You're crazy!” says the first man, *“We're thousands of miles from civilisation with no food or water – we're going to die!”*

But the other man continues to remain calm and says again, *“I earn over a million pounds a year.”*

The first man is by now exasperated, and shouts at him *“You really are crazy, what good is your money to you now?!”*

Once again, he replies calmly, *“I earn over a million pounds a year and I pledge 5% of my income on the planned giving scheme – the Vicar will find us!”*

A CELEBRATION OF GIVING

Today we celebrate the giving that takes place in our parish, and thank you for what is made possible through it.

Contrary to what my flippant joke might suggest, this is about far more than financial giving, it is just as much about the time and talents which you all share in God's service and to his glory.

I know how sacrificially many of you give already, and today is an encouragement and affirmation of that. It is an opportunity to think about **how** and **why** we give, in order to base it firmly on our spiritual lives. It is also a chance to consider what opportunities there are for giving in various ways.

HIS INDESCRIBABLE GIFT

What our first reading from 2 Corinthians shows us is that Stewardship promotions are nothing new.

Paul is writing to the Christians of Corinth asking them to make a collection for his work. The word '*collection*' has been translated here as '*ministry*' – a reminder that he is talking about placing our resources at God's service.

But why should we do such a thing? Paul is quite clear. The only possible reasons for giving is out of *gratitude* – gratitude for what God has done for us. We are to '*overflow in thanksgiving*'. Giving must always be a voluntary act, never out of guilt or a sense of obligation, 'not an extortion' to use Paul's word.

It must flow from our spiritual lives – because we want to give back out of the blessings we have already received as God's 'indescribable gift'.

On my visits to you I have heard many amazing stories:

- Of peace and courage found in the midst of bereavement and suffering.
- Of joy at a baptism or the blessing of a relationship.
- Of friendship, kindness and support that you give to each other.
- Of the finding of faith and a sense of the presence of God in worship and prayer.

Each one of you has a unique story of how God is working in your life through the ministry of this church.

And so I have two questions for today:

What does St Michael's give to you?

What do you feel you might give to St Michael's?

TIME

In terms of time: If I were to count the number of hours given to St Michael's each week I would very soon lose count. So many things done quietly, carefully, regularly, each week to help make this place run.

It is a truism of our age that we are 'time poor'. We all want more time, and so perhaps the appeal for your time might seem the least likely to be successful. But it is worth all of us considering how we spend our time and whether we use it in the ways that we would want. As Christians we are called to 'redeem the time', and make our whole lives an act of service.

Often, the greatest gift we can give to someone or something, is our time, because God knows how important it is. Time to listen to someone, to be with someone, or to do an unglamorous but essential task.

Perhaps there is something important that God is calling us to do, that we should make time for?

TALENT

In terms of talent: I continue to be amazed by the skills and experiences of everyone in this parish, and the way in which you already use them for God. It is this kind of sharing which makes this place the diverse and interesting church that it is.

But I am also aware that many of you have talents which are underused or not used at all – sometimes because no one has asked or because you cannot quite see how they might be used.

I want us to be creative in thinking about how your talents can be applied for ministry in this parish.

For some of you that will mean thinking about what you currently do and perhaps doing something new, for others it will mean offering your God-given abilities for the first time, whatever they might be.

God has given each one of us particular gifts and he wants us to discern how they should be discerned and fostered in his service.

MONEY

And then there is money.

This is the hardest thing to talk about, and the easiest way to upset people!

Kate Fox, in her book *'Watching the English'* talks about the particular difficulty English people have when talking about money – even when we really need to! The origins of this may lie in the class system, where to talk about money is considered vulgar. I can hear my mother saying; *'if you need to ask the price you can't afford it!'* Whatever the reason, we find it an embarrassing subject and try to avoid it.

Jesus however did not avoid the subject and did not find it embarrassing. What he recognised was that money itself was morally neutral. The coin could be used for God or for Caesar, and both had their validity.

And Our Lord stresses that the *way we give* is as important (perhaps even more important) than the *amount we give*.

The Widow in today's Gospel might only have given two coins of small value, but because she gave not out of her abundance like the others, Jesus holds her up as an example of generosity. She gave *'all that she had'* – and it was sacrificial.

Many of you already give sacrificially, and the results of this are to be found in the many and various ways in which St Michael's is active in this parish.

It may be that the value of your giving is something to consider, but what I am encouraging everyone to consider is *the way in which you give*.

It is particularly important that more people connected with St Michael's should give by direct debit. The reasons for this are simple – it is regular and predictable – and so it is very very helpful! A lower than average proportion of people at St Michael's give in this way and that is partly because of natural turnover and because there hasn't been any particular encouragement for some time.

Many of you will belong to a club or a gym and will pay a regular subscription. You probably pay for your household utilities electronically and online – I doubt there are many of us who pay our electricity bill by cash in an envelope!

The Church is definitely **not** a club or a business, but like them it too needs regular income. This is perhaps particularly important somewhere like Barnes where people are often away for business for long periods or go on holiday several times a year. By giving in a regular way, it means that your church is supported even when you are physically absent. It's here and flourishing when you get back.

NEXT STEPS

In the course of the next week or so, everyone connected with St Michael's will receive some more information celebrating our existing giving, and inviting you to consider how you might be able to share time, talent or financial resources. We have provided some hints and ideas of how you might do that, but at the end of the day, it is up to you to respond creatively and imaginatively.

Whatever your particular situation, please do pray about this.

In the short time I have been here I have already learnt to love this place, and most of you have been here far longer, and so your will love will be much deeper.

All of us know that this is a special and holy place where God's love and mercy are continuously lavished upon us with such generosity, and it is from this spiritual place that we should consider our offering as we thank God for his 'indescribable gift'.

Father Stephen Stavrou