

**'All things come from you and of your own do we give you'**

In my last parish there was someone whose giving varied considerably from week to week. Sometimes it was £30, sometimes £50 or even more. I once asked him why it was so different. He replied:

*'It depends how much I like the sermon!'*

But whether he liked it or not, he was always very generous.

My prediction is that some of you will like today's sermon and some of you will not – because some of us are happy to talk about money openly, and others prefer not to.

If you prefer an indirect approach to the subject – it was your turn last year. After my stewardship sermon in 2017 someone said:

*'It was wonderful! You preached a whole sermon about giving and you didn't once ask us for money!'*

I wasn't entirely sure if this was a compliment or not ...

But there is much to be said for straightforwardness in this area.

As another parishioner said to me:

*'I never realised how much it cost to run the church or how much I should give until a previous Vicar talked about it plainly.'*

And that's what we are doing today with the leaflet you have received that shows you some key facts and graphs.

It's also a pleasure to welcome Gabby Parikh, the diocesan giving officer, who will talk to us during the notices about the importance of the money we give to the parish support fund.

\* \* \*

Recently, a notice appeared in the pew sheet of a certain church that said:

*'We have noticed that the money received for candles is far less than the number of candles being used. Some might regard this as STEALING and we ask you to always make an offering of 50p when you light a candle.'*

I disagree. I don't think it is stealing.

When we light a candle in prayer we are not buying a candle, we are making an offering of what we can afford in response – although sometimes it is helpful to have an indication of what a *suitable* response might look like.

What we do in church is the *opposite* of what happens elsewhere.

When we go to a shop, we pay a fixed amount of money and then we receive some goods or services in return. Money first. Goods second.

But with faith and at church, it's the other way round.

God shares his gifts, and then we respond from the bottom of our hearts in gratitude and joy.

So it is that King David and the people of Israel give thanks to God for all that he has already given them – *'for all things come from you, and of your own have we given you'*.

So it is that the Son of God washes our feet, feeds us with himself in word and sacrament, and gives himself upon the Cross.

It is in *response* to what he has already given us, and what he continues to give us through the ministry of the Church that we make our offering – and it can never be stealing because it is freely offered in love.

But where the notice is helpful is that it gives a guide as to what response is necessary, in order that the ministry may be maintained not just for you but also for others. What is true of candles is true on a larger scale for the life of this and every church.

The reason for your giving is not whether you like the Vicar or agree with the PCC but the very fact that you are here, that you are a Christian and this is your church.

\* \* \*

Your giving must take account of a number of realities.

Each of us has different circumstances, and you must make your decision accordingly, but I hope the leaflet helps you to have a rough idea in mind of what might be expected of *most*, but by no means all, people living in this area.

It's also worth bearing in mind two things.

First, we tend to live more mobile lives than ever before. We may be regular and committed to this church; but many of us are often away on holiday, at a second home, or visiting relatives and friends at weekends. Even if you are generous when you are here, if you aren't giving by standing order, it means that we struggle to pay the bills while you are away.

Second, another reason for moving in this direction is that we are increasingly a cashless society. While I was on sabbatical over the summer I went to church and realised that I didn't have a penny on me – but I did have my debit card – but there was no way of using it in church. That's why we have recently made it possible to make card and contactless payments for certain events – something we will be extending to more events and services in the near future. This simply reflects the reality of the world we live in today.

\* \* \*

An efficient and well-run church like St Michael's looks wealthier than it is – and I would like to pay tribute to Jacqueline our Treasurer and all those involved with the finances who do such a fantastic job.

But perhaps the most serious aspect of our current situation is that we are not covering our cost to the diocese. It is a truly remarkable thing for a parish in this area not to be covering the basic cost of ministry, and I think it is a matter for all our consciences that parishes in some of the most deprived areas of South London receive less funding because of it. This really needs to change quickly.

\* \* \*

Some of you might know the priest and journalist Giles Fraser, who has a habit of hitting a nerve in what he says. Personally, I don't agree with him on most things, but he always makes me think about *why* I disagree. However, I do agree with one thing:

*'If you say something and no-one complains you probably haven't said anything worth saying!*

The point he makes is that if you are speaking the Gospel into situations that matter on subjects people care about then you can expect people to be challenged.

I am not necessarily inviting you to write long emails and letters of complaint to me and Churchwardens! But I am asking you think carefully about this subject. In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges his hearers – then and now – on this very subject when he says:

*'Where your treasure is, then your heart will be also'.*

Money certainly matters to all of us, and Jesus asks us where our priorities lie in its distribution. If this place and its ministry is a priority for you then each one of us needs to consider how we can contribute in a way that truly reflects what it actually costs, and what it means to you as an individual and as a community, so that we might be a blessing to ourselves and others, far and wide.