

Riches and rewards

This week we're looking at the Bible's teaching on giving. We heard Jesus' words about giving alms, giving to charity, giving to people in need, and some advice from St Paul about how rich Christians must give generously.

Right now, I feel like the least qualified person to preach to you on this subject. Following our move, with changes in income and various upheavals in our family's life, things are not settled in our finances, and we don't have the grip on our giving that we had before. I say this to you because I suspect that a good number of you are thinking, 'No Alison, *you're* not the *least* qualified to talk about giving, *I'm* the least qualified, I'm the one who hasn't got their giving sorted out. So if you're thinking that, and I'm thinking that, at least you and I know we're not alone.

In fact, we're in good company, because Jesus was speaking to people a bit like us when he taught those words about giving. Our Gospel today is part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Up there on a mount, a plateau, was Jesus talking to people who had their lives sorted out, financially? Barely any, if at all. He went up onto that hilltop to speak to large crowds who'd followed him when he started curing diseases and healing sicknesses. These crowds were full of people who needed help and who desperately wanted to hear God's good news for the poor. These weren't wealthy or highly-qualified people, who generally stayed in the capital city Jerusalem. In Jesus' own words, these crowds included the poor in spirit, people in mourning, the meek, the desperate.

And a few verses on in this same chapter, Jesus taught this needy crowd a simple prayer – we'll be praying it later this morning, we call it the Lord's Prayer. The prayer where Jesus teaches his disciples to pray every day for their daily bread.

Hunger was very common in the Roman empire. In Rome and Greece, it was every man for himself. There was no safety net if you were starving, and selling yourself and your family into slavery was one solution to poverty, because at least slaves got fed.

With this *lack-mentality*, as Geoff called it last Sunday, the rich held tightly to their wealth, because it was their only security in a very uncertain world. When Paul wrote to Timothy about rich people being haughty, and setting their hopes on their wealth as security, this was a very surprising, very counter-cultural challenge. The ancient world was: 'If you've got it, flaunt it', and beyond the needs of immediate dependents, and taxes, the average rich person didn't have any sense of obligation to share with anyone else. Altruism was not in fashion.

The crowds listening to Jesus were in a doubly precarious situation because they were living in an occupied country. We're seeing far too much of the risk and horror associated with having troops controlling your home, in the middle east, in Ukraine, in Sudan, elsewhere around the world. We understand, at least a little, how terrifying that can be.

When you and I find ourselves in times of shifting finances, increased financial vulnerability, we aren't really experiencing anything that this crowd hadn't experienced. So the teaching Jesus gives to them, we know we can take on too.

The one clear advantage that crowd did have (probably over and above the converts St Paul was writing to later) was that they knew, and followed, Jewish teaching about giving to people in need. Jewish society was unique in the world of the ancient near east, one of the reasons why God called them a 'light to the nations' – it was their responsibility to teach care for others to the rest of the world. It's why Jesus says: 'WHEN you give alms', instead of 'IF you give'. At first the community-care rules in the Torah were about leaving some of your agricultural produce available for people in

need – if you know the Old Testament story of Ruth, you can see that generosity in action. As communities began to have a coinage system as well as a barter one, they began to take up community collections for the poor in the community. So Jesus is talking to mostly low-income Jewish people about how they make their *regular* contribution to community poverty relief.

The trumpets are probably more of Jesus' wonderfully exaggerated story-telling language, but they certainly help us get the idea. It's about giving ostentatiously, so others are impressed. The modern equivalent might be attending charity galas, posting social media photos giving to a beggar, or what's been nicknamed 'white saviour' images, which show young Americans and Europeans hugging babies in African orphanages. Sure, we raised money for the hospital, I gave to a beggar, they helped an orphanage, but, says Jesus, **you have had your reward**.

The reward might be social standing, admiration from others, more 'likes' on my page, or even the reassurance to myself that I'm one of the good guys. These aren't bad rewards, are they? They really aren't bad, they're fine. I helped someone else, and gained something for myself, too.

So why is Jesus saying that's not how we're to do it? Why does Jesus say that if I'm giving to someone with my right hand, even my own left hand shouldn't know about it, let alone another person?

The answers come from both of our readings. St Paul says the aim is to 'take hold of the life that really is life'. Jesus says that it's about our Father God seeing us, no one else. St Paul reminds us that this is our Father God 'who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment'. Jesus says that only God's reward has value, St Paul says that only God's reward provides foundation for the future.

Jesus and Paul tell us that, as we give without fanfare, God rewards us with:

Life that really is life

The only safe foundation in a precarious world.

PAUSE

Let's look at that idea of life that really is life – our minds might think immediately that Paul is talking about eternal life, but let's remember that life with Jesus starts now. We're not told to make ourselves miserable to earn a future blessing. The blessings start now! In the context of giving, joy in giving is another instruction of St Paul's. The joy of giving to someone we love is well known. Based on the Old Testament teaching of love for the community, Jesus and Paul take it for granted that our love for our own family should keep extending, in Christian love, beyond our blood relatives. Who is my neighbour, asked Jesus, on another occasion? The answer: the person in need. Remember the story? The person in need, *even when he's a despised enemy*. Father Martin neatly summed it up as 'the whole of Christian ethics could be summarised as treating anyone in need as if they are your family'.

Maybe it all comes down to behaving like God. God is our rich provider, taking joy in giving everything we need to sustain ourselves, and more. We often don't thank him as we should, and many people don't even know he's the creator and provider of all. When we give joyfully, we have the blessing of passing on some of his gifts to us, and in that way taking on a little part of the nature of God. And just as God does, we will have to accept that people may be ignorant of the good we have done for them. Joyful giving without being thanked. Joyfully giving where only God sees.

Now there obviously are some limits to what we give. Some of those limits are to conserve what we ourselves need (not want, need, it's always tough to remember that). Other limits can be thought about in terms of giving to family. If my sons, young adults, ask me for something, I won't always give it to them. They and I have to think about, not what they want, but what they *need*. I also have to

think about my own limits. It might often be better for them to save up money for themselves, developing independence, or having the time to re-think what they *want*. But if, on the other hand, my children are in *need*, and I can give, even if there's some sacrifice in the giving, then of course I will give, and I'll probably give joyfully! As Father Martin implies, we can apply similar concepts of limits, needs, wants and independence, to our giving outside the family, too.

In addition to limits, there are some important things to note about control. When I give money, I give *up* control of what is done with that money. This is painful! I've often tried to decide (on not enough evidence) if beggars look like they're going to use my money wisely. I've had to conclude that this is not how God gives to me, and if I give a euro to a beggar, it's not my job to try to reform (or control) her or him. I chose to give, now the money is theirs. On a bigger level, though, that's why it's wise to choose charities carefully, because if we're going to put money into an organisation's hands, we want to be certain the money will go to the people who need it. In Luxembourg we have a tragic example of that with Caritas, right now. And as Christians, as well as doing careful research into the governance and work of charities, we also make our giving the subject of our prayers, asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance on all of our giving.

I want to come back to the word control, because another disturbing side of giving can be the idea that someone is now beholden to us. 'I gave to you, now you have to do what I want.' This is not giving as our loving heavenly Father gives! We cannot give to family or friends with the expectation that they will repay it with gratitude, or even worse, with obedience. My gift does not buy your compliance. Perhaps this is another reason why Jesus told us to give in secret, so that we can't, deliberately or accidentally, begin to cry; 'How could you do this to me, after all I've done for you?' Father Martin again put it brilliantly: this is 'not giving, but 'enslaving' - do not make your money the master of others'.

Phew. It seems to me we've dealt with some very heavy stuff, following a reading which spoke of enjoying God's gifts, and being joyfully, secretly generous, as our Father God is secretly generous.

By looking into the things which kill that joy of receiving from God, and the joy of giving to others, it seems to me that the culprits are fear and the lack-mentality, looking for human praise, seeking to pass judgement, and trying to control others. These are all very natural human reactions, and some of them are quite acceptable in the culture around us, so we may barely notice them as they hold us back from this joy of giving. We need to ask God for the in-dwelling of his Holy Spirit, so that he can continue his work of transformation in us, as we learn how he wants us to give, and enjoy the giving.

Let's bow our heads in prayer.

Generous Father God, we pray you will fill us with your Spirit of creative, joyful, secret giving. We thank you for the ways we already give to those in need, and we pray for the people and causes our money is currently helping. Please guide us as we seek to become more like you, following your will for our money, and the rest of our lives.

Amen