

Giving in Faith

**A Sermon preached in St Mary's Walton-on-Thames  
on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

**Readings: 2 Corinthians 9. 6-10; Matthew 6. 1-4**

Today, St Valentine's Day, is traditionally a day for giving. Some people seem to give in hope: here are flowers, card, chocolates (delete as applicable), to indicate that I hope very much that we can have some kind of meaningful relationship. Others give in thanksgiving: here are some flowers, card, chocolates (delete as applicable), to thank you for still being my love, and for all you are to me.

Today, however, we're going beyond both those motivations to think about 'Giving in Faith'. You may well ask, what's the connection between giving and faith? If you believe the old saying that the last part of us to be converted is our wallet (and observation suggests there's a lot of truth in that), then you may say there's very little connection between giving and faith. On the other hand, cast your mind back to where we started this sermon series, and Hebrews 11.1: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"; or in Tom Wright's version, faith "is what gives assurance to our hopes; it is what gives us conviction about things we can't see." What both translations point to is the fact that it always takes faith if we're to embrace and live by the unseen reality of God's Kingdom, and to fulfil what we believe to be God's call to us.

To take only one local example: just about three years ago, we were in the midst of our Vision Process; the Going for Growth groups were in full swing; and it was then that first we began to explore the possibility of bringing a Church Army Evangelist for our parish. That involved a major step of faith; because when we began to push at that door, it didn't look at all promising. We had nowhere for a family to live. We had no funding. We believed that this might be God's will for us; but if we wanted to take it further, it would require faith.

Since September 2008, as you know, we have been blessed with not one but **two** Church Army Evangelists. Church Army bought them a house, and is funding two-thirds of their combined salary.

We've also received some start-up funding from the diocese. Our outreach to the parish is being renewed, transformed, and expanded, in all sorts of ways. My point is this: it would have been so easy to look at the possibility, and see all the potential difficulties; it would have been so easy to think, 'we can't do this'. But we didn't. Together, we took a step of faith – faith in something we couldn't see; faith that God would honour our faithfulness — and the result is that we have Patrick and Sheila, helping us develop our outreach and bringing in the Kingdom more fully here in Walton.

Working through that process reminded us that carrying out God's plans always involves living by faith and praying in faith. What we often overlook is that it also involves **giving** in faith. St Paul knew that, which is why he devotes a substantial part of 2 Corinthians to teaching on giving. Three-quarters of the way through that teaching come these words: "the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." We don't have to be farmers to work out what he wants to convey.

First, if there is no sowing there will be no reaping. It's that simple. It's no accident that in his parables Jesus often used the language of seeds, sowing, reaping and growth to describe the Kingdom of God. It seems that even God's Kingdom grows through sowing.

For us, that Kingdom sowing may be the investment of our time; or using a skill or an enthusiasm; it may involve putting ourselves out for the sake of others. But it will also involve giving money. 'Time and Talents' isn't an alternative to giving financially. It's not an either/or situation; it's a case of both/and. That's because for any parish, giving money releases ministry and enables mission. Without that giving, at best, the ministry and mission will be stunted; at worst, they simply won't happen at all.

Let me give another local example, last autumn's annual giving review; there was an increase of £6,200; though that was from only 11 new planned givers (I don't know who they are, and I don't want to); and 27 existing donors increasing their gifts. Add those two number together, and we find that the difference was made by only 38 people; though when we reflect that our electoral roll is over 350, and that others who come to our churches aren't yet on the roll, that shows how much further we have to

go. Sadly, however, through a combination of people leaving the parish, retirement, some losing their jobs because of the recession, and because some died, there was also a drop in planned giving of £3,500.

The result meant that the overall increase in our planned giving, though still a significant and commendable achievement in a time of recession, was over £2k less than the increase in our quota; which we have to pay to the Diocese. Our quota – sorry, Parish Share – has gone up by £11,000 in two years. That's why we're not waiting till 2012 to have another major campaign like Funding the Vision. We need to hold it this autumn. You can work out the sums for yourself: without an increase in our giving in the autumn, and with another rise in the quota doubtless on the way next year, it is inevitable that our ministry and mission will be compromised. Some things may even have to stop.

The thing is that when we sow, we reap far more than we have sown. We sow a seed, but reap an ear of corn; in the Parable of the Sower, Jesus speaks of up to 100-fold growth for the sowing of a single seed. The part we often forget, however, is that reaping can come much, much later than sowing. We know it's true for farming; otherwise there would be instant harvests. Of course, that goes against the grain in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain. We just need to look at the TV schedules: it started with *Ground Force*, and the instant transformation of weedy wildernesses into manicured gardens, complete with decking and water feature! Nowadays, it's '60 minute Makeover'. Whether in house or garden, the message is the same. An instant harvest, without any noticeable investment by the householder.

But we know there's no such thing as an instant harvest. No farmer who sows today expects to reap tomorrow. In the same way, in the economy of the Kingdom of God, we shouldn't look for an instant harvest. We're learning that in this parish, both in relation to the mission that's being spearheaded by Sheila and Patrick, and also with Mandy's pioneering work with our children and young people. We've seen some wonderful first-fruits, but we believe there's more to come. That doesn't mean we were wrong in our assessment of what God wanted us to do; nor that we shouldn't have invested all that time, energy and money. All it means is that, even with Kingdom of God sowing, the harvest can be a long time a-coming.

So what are we to do while we wait? In the world of business or high finance, it might be called 'holding your nerve'. In the Church of Jesus Christ, it's called faith. Not blind faith; but the kind of utterly rational, credible faith that looks to God's generosity and faithfulness in the past, and on that basis trusts him for the future. There will be times when having this kind of faith will feel risky, and we should not be surprised when it does. Often, it will be because Christian giving takes us beyond the language and the logic of the balance sheet. That's not to say that Giving in Faith means giving mindlessly or recklessly; quite the reverse. Nor is a faith decision the same thing as an emotional decision, though I've heard people confuse the two. Emotions can be unreliable; but faith in a faithful, generous God is the surest foundation upon which to build our lives and his Kingdom. So, yes, of course, we need to think about what we give; as Paul writes "Each of you must give, as you have made up your mind". But simply doing the sums and adding up the ledgers can leave God out of the equation. I have yet to encounter any accounting guidelines which leave space for the exercise of faith.

Valentine's Day is a wonderful time to thinking about giving. Giving in hope, yes, because our hope is based on God's promises for a future which we cannot yet see. And giving in thankfulness, because there's nothing so powerful in renewing our faith than a thankful heart for what Paul calls God's "indefinable gift": the gift of Jesus, of his love, his salvation, his life, his forgiveness, his grace, everything that flows from Jesus' death and resurrection. (Gratitude for all that is also, by the way, the surest way for our wallet to be converted to Christ as well as the rest of us; though it's not inevitable.)

Above all, what marks out Christian giving is faith. Flowers wither; chocolates have an use-by date (though in my experience they never last that long). But the growth that God gives in bringing in his Kingdom, that can bear fruit for all eternity. St Paul is right: "the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." Concealed inside that familiar verse is a yet more fundamental lesson in faith: we need to sow if God's Kingdom is to grow. Amen. So may it be.

Charles Stewart