

Giving: The 'Blackpool Rock' of the Bible

*A sermon given on Sunday Jan 25th 2020,
St Christopher's Pott Shrigley*

The late great Bob Monkhouse had a party trick he used occasionally on TV. He would ask the audience for a random list of subjects, and then, from his enormous repertoire of gags, he would proceed to make jokes on each subject: however random or unpromising those subjects appeared.

I feel a bit like Bob this morning. Not, you'll be delighted to hear, because I plan to do a stand-up routine for you. It's because I plan to preach on giving, but to use as my starting point, not a Bible passage specially chosen, because it speaks about money; but rather the passages which just happen to be set for today in the Church of England.

Now, that might sound like a rather obscure point about what goes on in a vicar's head when he's planning a sermon. But, in fact, I think it makes an important point for all of us; which is that the message about giving is never far away in the Bible: it's there, at least in the background, throughout its pages. Giving is not an afterthought for Christians – although we often treat it as if it were: it goes right to the heart of the Bible story, of our Faith.

In our second reading, Paul writes,

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.... (1 Corinthians 1)

This is one of his most striking, even shocking, ways of explaining the meaning of the Cross – effectively calling God a fool. But who else than God, if they were trying to save the world, would have thought of the audacious, extravagant, self-giving of his Son on a cross as the way to do it? To the world's thinking it is indeed foolish of God to make Himself vulnerable, to give up so much – especially for people who don't deserve it.

And, to the world's mind, it is similarly foolish to give generously: to give to God's work; to give help and support for people you don't even know; to give of resources you could keep for yourself; to give even when the beneficiaries may not deserve it.

Or, take our first reading: the wonderful Old Testament wisdom of Ecclesiastes. We heard today surely the best known passage from that book:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. (Ecclesiastes 3)

Less well known are the words at the end of our reading:

What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

At first sight this is a rather despairing vision. But the writer is here warning about the ultimate meaninglessness of existence without God. *What do workers gain from their toil?*, he asks. I hear an echo of Jesus' words: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... (Matthew 6).* Accumulating more money as an end in itself is ultimately a futile way to live.

Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions, said Jesus.

He went on to tell the parable of the rich man who reached retirement with a full bank account. The man says to himself,

'You have plenty...laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, *'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you....'*

And Jesus concludes,

This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God. (Luke 12).

And there's something else we can pick up from those words in Ecclesiastes, too. If there is ultimate meaninglessness in storing up riches just for ourselves, the writer also hints at the key to a life filled with meaning: and that is, to see our lives in the context of God's eternal plan. God, he says, has *'set eternity in the human heart'*. If we have a sense that this is God's world, and that he is at work in it, bringing his blessing, presence, healing and salvation, then we will want to be a part of that: to offer ourselves, what we have and what we are, in his service. And, importantly, we won't even demand that we can see for ourselves the difference made by our money, or our efforts; it will be enough to know that God holds time and eternity in his hands, and *He* will see his plans through.

I remember a couple of sermons I did when I was new here which people seemed to remember for some reason. There was the one where I brought a couple of the useful things I found around the garden when we moved into the vicarage.



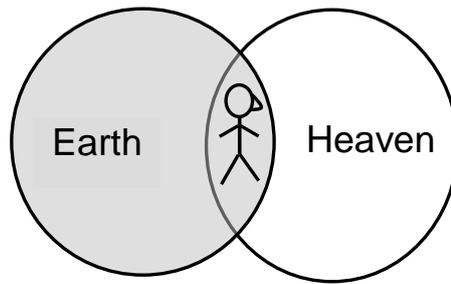
Jesus says,

Whoever is thirsty, let him come to me and drink...and streams of living water will flow from him (John 7)

- we're given the Spirit, not just to 'quench our own thirst', but so that it can 'flow out' from us to others. We are to be channels of God's love into this world. Christians should be 'pipes', not 'buckets'!

God's gifts are for passing on, not hoarding. This is true of the spiritual things God gives us - and the material. The Holy Land itself provides us with a perfect example of this: the Dead Sea is unusual in that it is a landlocked lake which is so low down that nothing can flow out of it. Water, containing minerals, flows in; but the only way out is by evaporation. So, the water disappears, but the minerals remain: and over the years they have built up and up, making the water toxic – and dead. Holding on, like a bucket, to everything which flows to you, is the way of death: being a channel – a pipe – of god's grace is the way of life.

Another visual sermon which a number of you remember is this one:



I won't recap the talk; but it was all about being citizens of Heaven, while living in the world. Here, too, the link to giving is impossible to avoid. Paul writes:

You have been raised to life with Christ, so set your hearts on the things that are in heaven.... Keep your minds fixed on things there, not on things here on earth. (Colossians 3)

This will mean that we have a different set of standards and attitudes than the world around us; whether it be in loving our enemies, in our concern for the outcast - or in our attitude to our possessions.

I could go on, but you see the point. Whenever we try to explain some aspect of the Christian message, the subject of giving is never far away. It runs through our Christian Story like the proverbial Blackpool through a stick of rock.

And yet....we're not that keen on talking about it! Preachers often tend to avoid it – and congregations are often happy for them to do so!

Maybe this is because some have experienced the church talking about giving in ways which have been insensitive or inappropriate: or at least they may have heard such stories from others...

Whatever the reason, it is perhaps just as well that we don't actually have the option of never mentioning money in church. Because our church couldn't function for one day without realistic giving of money by its members and supporters. It would, no doubt, be very nice if all we needed just came down from on high direct to our Treasurer: but I'm not sure it would be good for us! If our attitude to money, to giving, is as important as the Bible says, then it is all to the good that we are made to face up to the financial facts of life in this way.

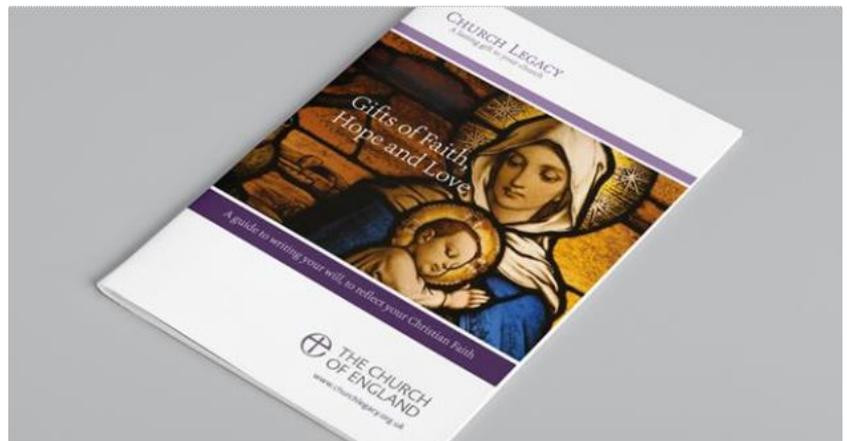
Here are a couple of those 'financial facts':

One big item is our 'Parish Share': the money we give to the Diocese –nearly £55,000 last year, and over £56,000 this year. This does come back to us in many ways: our parish clergy (my stipend and housing, Steve's Murphy's training – and John Buckley's pension!); and also the vital service we receive from the Diocese (our central administration, our Bishops and Archdeacons, and so-on); but it's also true that, under our share system, parishes like ours pay extra, based on the perceived affluence of the area.

Our basic running costs – including share – come to just under £2000 **every week**. currently our income is £1696. I'll pause for a minute and let that sink in: £1696, largely from our members' giving, every single week. Please don't think for one moment that our church council, wardens, and myself, don't recognise and appreciate the generosity and faithfulness which that represents.

So you will notice we are running a deficit: not ideal, and we are aiming to achieve the healthier situation where income is covering expenditure. What has saved us, though, is that over the years we have received a number of legacies, which have provided us with a financial buffer. And, while at this rate these reserves will not last too long, legacies have been a real blessing to the

ministry of this church. If this is something which you might wish to consider, then we have a number of these booklets which give more detail on legacy giving to the church.



So, we have visited the subject of giving again: a 'Cinderella' subject for preachers and congregations, yet one close to the very heart of God. I will simply finish by emphasising that any response you make is entirely your own business, and between you and God. But I do caution against two opposite reactions:

The first reaction is to feel pressurised, even manipulated, into doing something you are not happy to do. Can I say unequivocally that this is not my intention, nor that of our Church Wardens and Church Council, who have asked me to speak of these things today. All we would ever wish to do is to present clearly the Bible's teaching on giving – and to present equally plainly the facts about our church's finance, and to encourage and challenge you to respond. We would not aim to put any kind of pressure on anyone, to make anyone feel awkward, or to pry into what is a personal and private decision.

Hello!

Thank you for your interest in giving to **Pott Shrigley Church**.

In a folder in the drawers in church (top drawer) you will find:

1. Bank **Standing Order** forms
2. **Gift Aid Declaration** forms
3. A form combining **both** the above

If you would like to donate directly from your bank, you can use one of the Standing Order Forms, which you should take to your bank. Alternatively, you can set up a payment online using our bank details:

Yorkshire Bank, Macclesfield Sort code: 05-05-68
Account number: 40103719 Name: Pott Shrigley PCC

If you would prefer to give using cheque or cash in a weekly numbered giving envelope, please either call me (01625 574545 or 07974 822019) or leave me a note in the top drawer.

If you are a tax-payer, please fill in one of the Gift Aid forms and leave it in the top drawer for me to collect (for Gift Aid we need a signed paper form, whichever means you use for your regular giving!).

Thanks again! Bless you.

Sally Winstanley (Gift Aid and Giving Secretary).

The other undesirable reaction is one which we can all easily fall into: to agree in general with all that has been said, to perhaps even intend to do something about it; but then not actually to follow through and do it. Our Giving Secretary, Sally Winstanley, has produced a simple leaflet (pictured left), to explain the opportunities which are presented to enable us to set up our giving in a regular, committed way.

I hope this sermon will prompt you to think and pray about your giving: perhaps to increase it – or, indeed, decrease, if your circumstances dictate; or, if you are not part of a regular giving scheme, to take the opportunity to put that in place.

But may I finish by celebrating all that is already given – by so many of you, and, most of all, by God.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians, 9).

David Swales