

## Sermon, Peel Cathedral, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2022 – Stewardship Sunday

**Readings:** Job 19: 23-27a; Matt 19:16-30

Today, I'm starting with a confession: the first time I embezzled the church was when I was about four. I clearly remember the occasion. It must have been about half past two on a Sunday afternoon in winter. My Dad was buttoning up my winter coat – it had a red velvet collar and pocket flaps. He heard a chink of coins and discovered half a dozen pennies in my pocket. Each time I went to Sunday School they gave me two old pennies to put in the collection and for several weeks I'd stashed half of my offering and only given one penny. I had no idea what I might do with the others – there was no opportunity of spending it on anything else, but I guess I just liked to know that I had that secret hoard.

My parents were gentle with me, but you'll be pleased to know that I haven't knowingly embezzled again.

Another lesson I learned very early was the principle of tithing – the idea of giving a tenth of our income to God. Abraham was the first person recorded who gave a tenth of everything he had to the priestly figure of Melchisedek, King of Salem, and this generosity became part of Jewish life. You'll find lots of references to tithing in the Old Testament. I can remember learning about budgeting while I was a member of the Girls Brigade and assuming that I would have to expect to give away 10% of my gross salary.

Tithing was introduced as a legal requirement in England in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, as a kind of church tax on the general population. During the Second World War my mother worked in the Tithe Commission which had been unravelling the tithing system for a hundred years then! She wanted to have a more active role in the war but was told that what she was doing was really important.

Today some people point out that the original tithing was to support the Levites – the Israeli tribe that was responsible for operating the Temple, and who had been given no land of their own – and to support the poor (Deut 14:29), and that we pay taxes to help the sick, the elderly and those with no work, so there's no need to give away as much as a tenth of our income. Other people look back at the Old Testament and say that the tithes are what we must give to God, and that freewill offerings are over and above that.

Maybe because I was taught the principle of tithing so early, it's something I've endeavoured to do, even when I bought my first home and the mortgage rate was 16%. For those on low incomes, 10% seems a big proportion of their income; for those on high wages, 10% seems a huge amount to give away.

In the New Testament the focus moves from Jewish legalism to an understanding that all we have comes from God, and that we are stewards of it rather than owners. Indeed in the very early days of the Church Christians didn't claim any of their possessions as their own, but shared everything they had (Acts 4:32). They sold their possessions and gave to anyone as they had need (Acts 2:41). I find that very challenging. When I came back from living in Africa I intended to pare down my possessions and live lightly on the earth. That was 25 years ago and I still have too much stuff. But whilst in my head I know that I'm a steward rather than an owner, I find it really difficult to give things away.

Our Gospel reading shows that I'm not alone. A rich young man who had kept all the Jewish laws still felt that there was something lacking in his life. Jesus saw that it wasn't so much what he was lacking as the way he cherished his possessions. When challenged to sell everything and give it to the poor, it was too much and the young man went away sadly.

Jesus didn't tell everyone to sell up and give it away. What he did was to put his finger on what was preventing people from living life in all its fullness, and gave them the opportunity to change.

It's not easy to have the responsibility of speaking on Stewardship Sunday. None of us likes to be challenged about how we use our resources.

And it is resources, not just money that we need to think about. I know that several years ago on Stewardship Sunday there was a member of this congregation who was giving as much as they could. They felt harangued in the sermon and, as they were unable to give any more, decided not to come back. They felt that what they were already giving wasn't appreciated. I would be very sad if you feel that way this morning. I know that people are giving sacrificially to the Cathedral and I want to say a very real and big "Thank You".

It is because of your generosity that we have been able to pay our Parish Share each year. And that we are a long way towards the amount we need to be able to make this building fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and for wider community use.

Earlier in the year we reviewed the work of the Cathedral and we found that there were some 350 jobs being done by 150 volunteers – many of us are wearing several different hats during the week. So thank you for all you are doing in practical ways to establish the Kingdom of God here. Many of you are people of prayer. Thank you for your ministry among us. Who knows what has been accomplished through your prayers?

As we look forward to our plans for next year, there are some practical things you may like to know. We are planning to close the Cathedral in early May for the work to be done, and we hope that we will be able to reopen for Christmas 2023. We will be using the Corrin Hall for worship and for other activities that would normally take place here. The contractors will be fencing off the whole site so that there will be no access from Atholl Street or Lyndale Avenue and the car park will become their site office and place for their machinery. There will be no walking route through the site. In order to be safe and yet to access the Corrin Hall, there will be a new pedestrian entrance from Derby Road, and a wheelchair pathway next to the car park entrance.

We will find it inconvenient – particularly for those who usually park next to the Cathedral. It is possible to park 9 cars at the Deanery, and there is the town car park next door. We will be providing lifts for those who need to get as close to the door as possible. The inconveniences will be temporary, and we are all looking forward to being back in this building, to having a kitchen here – and toilets! – and to being warmer. And to all the opportunities that the reordered building will provide.

At one stage Alastair was recruiting people as unskilled labour to remove all the rubble under the pews. You'll be relieved to know that you won't be roped in for that, but there may be some opportunities to help in a practical way. And in this time of high inflation and large fuel

bills, the Cathedral is considering offering a warm space in the Corrin Hall a couple of days a week – one by extending the hours we are open on Mondays. It may be that you could offer to help with hospitality.

During the refurbishment we will still need to pay a lot of our bills, so I'd encourage you to continue with your regular giving. Should you find that you have a little extra that you can give for the Cathedral floor, that would be great – and the promise of match funding is still available so that any gift will be doubled. We have been busy approaching trusts to help with funding the refurbishment and you'll be pleased to know that altogether we have more than one and a half million pounds in the kitty. We have submitted more applications as the total required has risen to more than £2m. If you'd like to learn more about our plans, then you may like to come to one of the sessions on Tuesday evening or Wednesday afternoon at the Deanery this week.

In Corinthians (2 Cor 9:7) Paul tells us that each of us should give what we have decided in our hearts to give – not reluctantly, or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. He also quoted Jesus' words "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). And there's a lovely encouragement from Malachi, the writer of the last book of the Old Testament: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

I know that you have all kinds of charitable interests and as Christians we are called to care for the poor, the needy and the environment. Are any of us, like me as a child, stashing away resources without any clear plan? The challenge for each of us is to think before God about what we should be giving, and to whom. I leave it with you.

Amen.

Rosemary Clarke

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