

## **Kensington Area Giving Day Keynote: Bishop Emma**

Welcome! So glad you are here today. It is a great privilege to begin this day with some input on what it means to live as a generous people, reflecting God's amazing generosity to us. There are so many things we could have had a study day on. Why money and giving and generosity? Why not discipleship? Or evangelism? Or mission? Or safeguarding? Or the environment? Or racism? Because important though all of those themes are - and we will have further study days on some of them coming up - the topic of money is relevant to all of them. Money is something we spend a lot of time talking about as a church - and a lot of resources on - common fund, buildings, maintenance, stipends, giving. We shouldn't apologise for making looking at the topic of money a priority.

There's a kind of urban legend that Jesus taught about money more than he did anything else. That's not actually true. If you're after the topic Jesus spoke about more than anything else, it's probably the Kingdom of God. He did mention money in many of his parables, (11 of the 39 - someone has counted) but that's because he often used the topic of money as a way in to something else, usually the life of discipleship in the kingdom of God. For instance, the lost coin isn't about financial management; it's about God's outrageous love. We'll see this in another parable we'll come to look at in just a moment. So Jesus wasn't obsessed with money, but he was concerned about it, and he did see it as a good way to get at, and to illustrate, the way we live as Christians in the world.

Dealing with money is a real significant part of our life as a church. Which is why I wanted to begin this day with 2 words - thank you. Thank you for all you do as leaders in the church and those of you who deal with the practicalities of accounts day in day out. Your work is so important in this area that is far from easy. Which is why we hope this day will be help and equip you in your task.

*So why a day looking at money, generosity and what we do with our resources as a church?*

What is the context we're in?

The last survey of giving attitudes in the Church of England was in 2020 (pre-Covid), so the results are a little out of date, I suspect, but then the survey showed that:

1. A third of Anglicans do not give to their Church
2. 40% of Anglicans have never been asked to give regularly
3. Nearly half of Anglicans have never been asked to review their giving
4. Only half of Anglicans have heard a sermon on giving in the past 12 months & 60% said it didn't change their thinking on giving if they had
5. Less than a third of Anglicans say they are regularly thanked for their giving
6. The most popular reason to give to their Church was to help keep the building maintained.
7. Twice as many Anglicans have been asked to give by collection envelope (60%) compared to direct debit (31%) (*before contactless giving?*)
8. Anglicans are three times as likely to leave a legacy to charity than they are to church
9. Only 27% of Anglicans view their church's financial need as 'very important'
10. 49% feel they would be motivated to give more if they understood the impact of their giving

So what do we do with that information? How do we think about our role as leaders in the church and those involved with encouraging giving, and managing the finances that do come in? If we start with money, we'll be starting in the wrong place. If we start with God we'll be starting in the right place.

And so I want to start, not with money, but with grace. Martin Luther said this about grace: "*This is the mystery of the riches of divine grace; for by a wonderful exchange our sins are now not ours but Christ's; and Christ's righteousness is not Christ's but ours*". It's what St Paul expresses when he says: "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich*" (2 Corinthians 8.9). If we're talking economics, that quite some exchange!

The motivation for all our giving and the reason we do any of this at all is because of the generous grace of God, who in Jesus paid the price for our sins, and has given us eternal life in Him.

One of Jesus's parables above all others that I think exemplifies the concept of generous grace. The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard - Matthew 20.1-16. [read] This is a story about fairness - and grace. How many times (especially if you are parent to small-ish children) do you hear the words: "it's not fair!". Fairness is one of the most prized values of our culture. It's ingrained in us - things have to be fair. We watch stories on the news and if someone doesn't get what they deserve, or gets more than we think they deserve, we cry: "That's not fair!". A sense of fairness forms the bedrock of many of our systems, education, justice - and indeed there are many respects in which that is absolutely right, especially when unfairness highlights systemic injustice. But the trouble with the kingdom of God is that none of us really gets what is 'fair', what we actually *deserve*. If we did, we'd all be in trouble. God's Kingdom is built, not on fairness, but on outrageous, generous grace.

People like me love fairness because it gives me a sense of order or control. It gives me a sense of being able to rank things and put them in their proper place. This one is first. This one is last. The parable of the labourers in the vineyard shows us what happens when divine mercy, forgiveness, love, and generosity, trump human fairness. At its heart this story challenges us to re-think the way God sees fairness, which (*spoiler alert*) is not the same as we see fairness. The world says the last are last and the first are first because they deserve it. That's how a fairness-based society works. First come, first served. Survival of the fittest. Winner takes all. You get what's coming to you. But the thing about the generous grace of God is that it looks far beyond our productivity, our usefulness, our status, our successes or our failures.

One group is hired at the start of the day. And then 4 more groups are hired at points throughout the day - at 9.00, 12.00, 3.00 and 5.00. When the time comes to pay them, at 6pm they're all given the same amount, whether they've worked for 1 hour or 3 or 6 or 9 or 12. So, perhaps not surprisingly, the ones who've worked the longest grumble, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat". Those hired earlier in the day grumbled because others had been made equal to them. In contrast, a community of grace celebrates our absolute equality before God no matter what, no matter whether it's 'fair' or not.

As I heard the theologian Kelly Brown Douglas say in sermon recently: "The last are first and the first are last not because power structures have somehow been reversed, but because in the Kingdom of God all power structures are dissolved and everyone is fundamentally equal". We are all made in the image of God. We are all sinners. We are all redeemed. We are all the people for whom Jesus died. There are no favourites. None of us owns the vineyard. All of us work at God's invitation.

Actually in the story there was a difference between the workers hired at 6.00 and those hired at 9, 12, 3 and 5. The first lot agreed with the landowner what they would be paid: "The usual daily wage". They stated their terms and those terms were met. The later ones, were promised only "Whatever is right" in the eyes of the landowner. "Whatever is right" wasn't determined by the standard of the first workers, or the going rate for 1, 3, or 5 hours work. "Whatever is right" was based ultimately and purely on what the landowner decided, out of his heart of invitation and provision. Those later workers received *more* than they had earned, *more* than they deserved, "immeasurably far more than they had a right to ask or imagine". But that's what God does. A full day's wage for less than a full day's work? "That's not fair". No, it's not. That's grace.

So I wonder what this insight into the frankly ridiculous economics of God causes us to think about our money and what we do with it - both as individuals and as churches? If we are to reflect the heart of our God, what will our giving look like? What would our church finances look like? What would our graphs look like?

It would be a very strange day on giving if someone didn't at some point refer to Paul's well-known examination of generosity in giving in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he talks about the generosity of the Greek churches of Achaia and Macedonia towards the impoverished churches of Judea. Paul says about them: "*For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the favour of partnering in this ministry to the saints, and not as we expected*". (2 Corinthians 8.3-5) Now can I just say I sometimes imagine Archdeacon Richard and Mary Spredbury saying this about a parish and its Common Fund contribution: "*Entirely on their own, St Mungo's urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints ...*" (!!)

Anyway, how does St Paul start that section of his letter? With the need of the Judean church? With the financial situation of the Macedonians? With the formula for the paying of the Common Fund from one to the other? No, he starts like this: "*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia ...*" (2 Corinthians 8.1) Whenever one person or body or church or organisation gives to another, it is a reflection of, and a response to, the grace of God given to us in Christ Jesus.

So I wonder what this says to us right at the start of a day thinking about money? What would it look like to be a church founded not on principles of simple fairness, of trying to work out who owes what in comparison to whom, and who should give what and why, and who should get what, but on the same outrageous grace and generosity that God shows each and all of us - equally? Our measure is not to be what other people receive or give, but the measure that God gives to us. We give because we have been given everything by God. Jane Williams writing about the parable says: "*The challenge to mature Christians is to move beyond calculating what we give and discovering a new and deepening spirit of generosity, which Jesus teaches lies at the heart of kingdom life*".

This I think must be the starting point when we come to think about money, giving and sharing resources.

So with that in mind, let's think about some theological principles of stewarding the resources God gives us and principles for giving and sharing of the money we have. (*Not exhaustive*).

### **1. Money is important**

I am not great with numbers. I have to work really hard to understand money and finances. I am in awe of everyone in this room who understands it better than I. But I know money is important. I am interested in what money can do - for good or ill. You can tell a great deal about the priorities of an individual, an organisation, a church, by looking at their accounts. The numbers on the page of our annual accounts show us what we think it is worth spending money on, and therefore what we think matters and therefore our beliefs, our theology. I wonder if we can begin to see our finances like that - as theology in graph form?

### **2. Everything is on loan from God.**

Psalm 24.1 says: "*The earth is the Lord's and everything in it*". That includes wealth, financial resources, money. All that we have belongs to God, and is on loan to us to steward wisely. That's the essence of the prayer often prayed at the point of the offertory, as the collection plate is brought up (need to work out a way of doing that with the electronic giving devices) in our services, taken from 1 Chronicles 29: "*Yours Lord is the greatness the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty. Everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you and of your own do we give you*".

### **3. Our giving expresses our theology.**

Jesus said "*Where your treasure is there your heart will be also*". That works the other way too - where our heart is, we put our financial resources, our treasure. So thinking about giving is not only to do with asking *how much*, but also *where* and *how*, and *who* and *when*? When you look at your church

accounts, what do they tell you about your priorities as a church? It's not just how much we give, but where and with what principles. Can we really learn to read our church accounts with Kingdom eyes?

It's interesting that when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, it's not just about rich churches giving to poor churches, or giving from one region to another, but it's significant that it is the Gentile churches giving to the Jewish churches. This was the essence of Paul's theology - that Jews and Gentiles are members together of the body of Christ who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between them. In their giving, the Gentile Christians are not just helping out their brothers and sisters in need, but acting as powerful symbolic agents of unity and reconciliation. As John Stott writes: "*.. our Christian giving can express our theology. For example, when we contribute to evangelistic enterprises, we are expressing our confidence that the gospel is God's power for salvation, and that everybody has a right to hear it. When we give to economic development, we express our belief that every man, woman and child bears God's image and should not be obliged to live in dehumanising circumstances. When we give to the maturing of the church, we acknowledge its centrality in God's purpose and his desire for its maturity.*"

#### **4. Money is given to share.**

In 2 Corinthians, Paul says this: "*Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality*". (2 Cor 8.13) "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." Equality is different to fairness. In order to iron out inequality, there may need to be a rebalancing of what is strictly 'fair'. The aim, is that the wealth God gives to his people, should be shared so that where inequality has arisen through structural inequality, or history, or circumstances, there should be a more equal distribution of that wealth.

Like many things we are given to steward and use well, money can be used for great good and great evil. I believe that when we give sacrificially, when we order our money according to God's principles of grace and sacrificial generosity, we harness the power of money for good and away from evil. We're saying that money is not in control. God is.

#### **5. There is enough.**

"*But godliness with contentment is great gain*" (1 Timothy 6:6). We live in a culture of scarcity. Every time we turn on our news we see stories where there is not enough - money, food, time, energy, resources, wellness, flourishing, peace. The thing is, there is enough. God has given this planet more than we need of all of those things. But structural inequalities, war, prejudice, oppression, poverty, bad decisions - have all led to the resources not being distributed with equity. Some have much much more than they need, others not enough. Where we do have an abundance of resources, we tend to want to hold on to what we have, for fear it will run out.

I believe that God gives us in his church enough to fulfil the mission he gives us. It's just that not all of the money is in the right places. I love the story of the vicar who led her church embarking on a major fundraising effort. They had to raise many thousands of pounds. She stood up at the front of church on day 1 of the campaign and said, 'I am here to give you good news and bad news. The good news is that we already have enough to meet our financial giving target! The bad news is it's all still in your pockets'.

We can't do everything, and so we will need to make some tough decisions about what we spend money on and what we don't spend money on - *preferably according to the theological values God has placed on our hearts, see earlier point* - but there will always be enough to do what God asks us to do. When Christians live in a way that shows trust in God, and God's provision, giving away what we do not need, we are living in a countercultural way. What is our motivation for what we do with our money? Does it show a trust in God's provision, or a fear that there won't be enough, or will run out?

*Conclusion and close with prayer*