

The Incumbent's Role: Leading by Example in Generosity
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We worship a God of profligate, unbounded generosity. It is a generosity seen in the very first pages of scripture where creation is described as 'teeming': conjuring up an image of variety and abundance. This generosity doesn't stop with creation: it is seen supremely in the God who came and poured out his life with and for us, who gave up everything in order that we could experience the fullness of a life lived in Christ.

You may know the wonderful Methodist Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

This prayer of commitment is said annually at the start of each New Year, and it presents a really challenging picture of faith. What is interesting in regard to Stewardship are the words 'I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal'. They are like the words 'all my worldly goods I thee endow' or 'all that I have I share with you': in the marriage service. I don't think that's a coincidence – nor the fact that those who wish to join the religious life as a Monk or Nun take a vow of poverty. It's because following Christ is not simply a matter of the head or the heart: it also involves the wallet.

In the Church of England we find it rather embarrassing to talk about money. In London I would say that it can be even harder to do this as a Vicar than in other parts of the country, given the value of the Vicarages that many of us live in. Who are we in our 4-bed detached-house-with-study to be asking others to give? And some find the idea of giving a fixed percentage of disposable¹ income to the church unfair, as it doesn't take into consideration the cost of living. So instead of giving money from disposable income,

¹ Money left over after tax and national insurance has been deducted

they say it should be given from discretionary² income. This appears to make sense: while London has the highest overall income, high living costs mean some cities like Aberdeen (£1,240/month) actually have more leftover for spending than Londoners (£381/month)³. However, that's not the whole story.

Confident Disciples is one of the Diocese of London's three shared ambitions. Many of you will already have encountered the excellent Diocesan Lent courses or produced a shared Way of Life for yourself or your church. Within the materials to discern a Way of Life are lists of suggested 'postures' which will help churches and individuals to follow the injunction found in Micah 6:8 to "do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God". One of these postures is 'generosity': and while it is just one of many suggested postures from which to choose, I would suggest given the many words of Jesus on the subject of money it is rather more essential to our discipleship than that.

One of our daily prayer readings recently included these words from the prophet Malachi:

"Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings? ... Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."⁴

In our churches we cannot expect our congregations to see the importance of generosity if we ourselves haven't embraced the challenge of giving generously. Giving only after we know how much we'll have left over at the end of the month might seem prudent, but it will never give God the chance to show his faithfulness to us.

When we carry out our stewardship campaigns the emphasis is usually on explaining why people should give, outlining the way common fund pays for clergy and the needs of our particular parish. What we don't tend to mention is how giving is a crucial part of our worship, and vital for our joy and health as disciples. Giving sacrificially and joyfully will not only enable God's mission and ministry in your parish, but it will also help us grow in faith and trust. Why not take a quiet moment now to ask God how you can grow in generosity in your particular situation: and then look out for signs of God's blessing in your life and that of your church community.

² Money left over from disposable income after essential expenses (housing, food, transport, insurance, minimum debt payments) have been deducted.

³ 2023 figures

⁴ Malachi 3:7b-10