

A GENEROUS GOD AND A GENEROUS PEOPLE

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 5th June 2005

Psalm 150; Ephesians 1: 1-14; Mark 6: 24-34

Very broadly speaking, there is a theme to the sermons today and the next two Sundays, of thanksgiving to God, of how we live our lives in thanks to God for all that we have received. Next Sunday we will focus our attention on the Eucharist, the church's great act of thanksgiving to God, and the Sunday after, I'm going to preach "The Sermon on the Amount" – but that's for then, whereas now, we focus on the giving nature of God towards us, and our response to God's love and generosity.

Of course, when you say the word "generosity", some think immediately of "money", but of course it is far broader than that.

However, I have to tell you the story of the TV evangelist who had wires connected to the metal seats in his church. One Sunday he shouted, "All those willing to give \$100 to the church, stand up!" As he said this, he pressed a button and electricity zapped through the seats. There was a tremendous response... But later the sidesmen found three dead Scotsmen clinging to their seats.

Psalm 150, which we said together today, was possibly composed specifically to round off this collection of songs and words of praise used over 3,000 years ago in worship of God. It is expansive and all-encompassing in giving thanks and praise to God, whose greatness surpasses every human measurement of greatness. It ends with the rousing words: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!"

Our call today is to acknowledge that this same God, whose greatness surpasses any method of measurement we know of, is at the same time an amazingly giving being. The enormity of God, the wonders of God, have not caused God to be "so high and mighty" that anything lesser (including you and me) is ignored or beneath God's gaze! God – especially in Jesus Christ – has come close to us, and is generous to us.

Paul's opening words in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, also read this morning, remind us of how important we are to God, who "chose us before the creation of the world", he says, and who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Verse 7: "In him we have forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us...."

It can sometimes be hard to follow Paul's writings, with long sentences and many words joined together; but in this section, if it weren't the writings of someone who had an amazing experience of conversion and of God's grace, we might think it were the words of a manic person. For they are neither small nor quiet words; rather they are words big and loud and expansive in describing the goodness and richness of God. "God's grace (not just given to us, but) LAVISHED on us".

And today's Gospel reading is well known to us. It is part of larger body of recorded teaching where Jesus went up a mountainside followed by a large number of people, and, as Matthew records, Jesus began to teach them. Many subjects are covered – look at chapters 5, 6 & 7 to see it all – and he says to them [from 6:19], “Do not store up treasures on earth where all will eventually decay, but store up treasure in heaven where nothing decays.”

Jesus then says, “No-one can serve two masters ... you cannot serve both God and Money,” before going on to note God's incredible generosity to us in all the provisions God has made, from the birds of the air to the lilies of the field – AND in providing for us! God knows we need basic provisions, whilst requiring of us that we seek out the Kingdom of God as our priority.

It is not as if Jesus, even before the invention of Disney, is in some fantasy world in which we need only air to breathe; for he says “your Heavenly Father knows you need” food and clothes. But if Money is your master, then (by implication) you will be just like the pagans who run after all these things and still have no connection to the Kingdom of God!

Talking about generosity is about far more than money. There were many other passages of Scripture that could have been read today that address the subject, many of which are well-known, from the Gospels and also, for example, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he challenges us to give cheerfully, or from Paul's letter to the Philippians where he speaks on the subject of generosity. But there is something vital for us to hear in today's Gospel reading, not only about choosing to serve God above other things, but in the mindset that goes with it.

For, there is a human tendency to hoard. Whether it is natural impulse, or learned, or both, I leave for others to decide, but it is well noted and observed. Hence, noting that Jesus began by saying, in effect, “be aware of where you are hoarding treasures... is it on earth where it will decay, or is it in Heaven where it won't?” We will come back to that passage in 2 weeks' time.

If by nature, God is generous and giving, then surely a world in God's design will have generosity built into it? And if God is generous and giving, and humanity is made in the image of God, then surely we act more in keeping with the nature of God and the nature we were intended to reflect, when we are generous and giving? And surely, to the extent that we fail to live generously, we fail to live up to our full humanity as God intended?

Imagine a world without generosity. Oh yes, we can all think of examples of a failure of generosity, on our part or that of others – but I mean, a world truly with no generosity whatsoever. I wonder if such a world could exist – at least, it could not be remotely like the experience of the world at present.

Generosity of living, therefore, is a response to God, a response in thanksgiving to God who has given us all. To the extent that we are generous, to that extent, we reflect God.

To the extent we are generous in attitude, in resources of wealth, time and expertise, to that same extent, we reflect God and the values of God's kingdom. And I would suggest that our greatest difficulty in being generous is our tendency or our desire to hoard things for ourselves, rather than for God's Kingdom.

Generosity brings blessings to others. It comes from the same Greek root word for sharing, derived from the word for fellowship and community.

Generosity brings blessings to the giver, not just in some crudely egotistical way, rather in true pleasure at being able to contribute towards the good of others, and pleasure at having made an investment in the lives of others, whether for an individual or a community.

Generosity also multiplies blessings, as St Paul reminds us elsewhere in his writings (2 Cor 9:6): "Whoever sows sparingly, reaps sparingly, whoever sows generously, reaps generously." Generosity is an investment in the lives of others, and reaps rewards.

It is also pleasing to God. It is a response to God, from whom everything we have has come. To be generous, is to be in harmony with God's Kingdom – for it is a primary value of God's. And to fail to be generous, is to be out of step with God's values.

Generosity may be from our excess, or it may be sacrificial. I suggest that, for God, it is both. God's giving to us comes from his bounty, from his inexhaustible riches and resources, as a consequence of his inexhaustible love. In giving the beauty of the world and humanity and all the best of this world, God has not somehow run out of something – rather, he has given to us out of excess. But God's giving has also been sacrificial – the gift of Jesus, and the act of dying on the cross for us, is a supreme act of love and sacrifice, not in any way to be trivialised.

So too, our giving may at times be from excess, and may at times be sacrificial. The parent who, exhausted, spends yet another night attending to a sick child, knows what that is about; so too, the person who has given up an opportunity to enjoy something on an occasion, because it seemed better to offer than same opportunity to another.

Having a generous nature on our part (with a small n) is in keeping with Nature (with a capital N): The Nature of God, and God's original design for this world (even though damaged by sin). It is not about doing the occasional generous deed, and thinking self-righteously what a wonderful generous person I am, it is about becoming generous in all my attitudes and deeds.

I would never trivialise what I learned in the Scouting movement many years ago. We were taught, amongst other things, to do a good deed every day. I would suggest that is a good way of helping youngsters develop a pattern of behaviour. But for an adult, to think "well I've done my good deed for the day, so needn't do more", is to make it a mechanical, obligatory thing, and misses the point completely!

Rather, let generosity grow in us as a continual response to a generous God, who continuously pours life and love into us, lavishing us with his gifts, and has never once sat back and said: Well, I was generous to them once, and that'll do for the time being! Who never once sat back and said: That's enough grace for today!

Some two-and-a-half years ago, when I was still quite new here, Joan Hoole said something very simple and very wise. She was one of our church wardens at the time, and we had been talking about the huge financial difficulties in the parish at the time, and the need to address that if this parish was to continue and to grow rather than to slowly die out. But we were also speaking about our collections for food parcels distributed through uMngeni AIDS Centre, and Joan challenged us to become "impulse givers".

Far from being a call to frivolous or unrealistic giving, it came rather from the observance of the well-known "impulse buying" that stores capitalise on. If we can come to the end of our shopping for whatever we regarded as a necessity – be it food, groceries, clothes, schoolchildren's stationery etc., and still add on a chocolate / another piece of clothing / a dessert that we wouldn't normally buy... then why could we not learn to be impulse givers and be generous over and above the giving we have already done – be it in terms of time, skills or wealth.

To conclude...

Now I suppose you may wonder: Isn't he going to say what we must give to? And what about the church – which obviously has needs – for itself (its regular running as well as its big projects like the new building which will probably start the week after next), or for others we contribute to, like the food parcels already mentioned.

[Even – that he has secretly installed metal strips along the pews, and intends to follow the example of the shocking TV evangelist]

But that would be to miss the point. For whilst the church will bring various needs to our attention all the time, and not only the church but many others besides, the call is not just to a specific act of giving at a specific time, rather it is to encourage us to act in harmony with God, who is a gracious, outpouring God, who has blessed us with enormous gifts and enormous capacity for giving, if we will choose to live in that way out of thanks for all God has done for us!

So instead, my ending is to a call to us all, in our prayers and daily life, to work that one out and to live that out. I invite us also to signal to God, as we come forward to the altar rail yet again to receive the grace of God in Christ poured out for us and given afresh to our lives, by quietly but deliberately and consciously asking God for grace... grace to live lives of generosity.