

## Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 19th June 2005

### Sermon on the Amount

#### Psalm 106 : 1-24 and 45-50; 1 Chronicles 29: 10-13; Matthew 6: 19-21

Somebody tells the story of the church where people were desperately searching round for loose change to put in the collection plates, which were large brass plates – and therefore quite valuable. They were returned almost empty to the minister, who held them up and said, "Lord, we thank you for the safe return of these plates!"

On the other hand, there's a different story of 3 children discussing their fathers.

1. One child says – My father writes words on a piece of paper, sends them to a newspaper, and he gets paid some money for it.
2. The next child says – My father writes words to music, sends them to a band, and he gets paid a lot of money for it.
3. To which the third child says – My father writes a few lines on paper, then uses them to preach a sermon in church, and they need 4 men to carry up the big baskets of money!

2 weeks ago: Theme: "A Generous God and A Generous People"

God is generous and giving in every way. Our response is to live generously – not in one or two acts of generosity, nor only towards our own, nor only towards the church – but in all of life, aiming to be in harmony with the generous nature of God.

1 week ago: (Brief) focus on the Eucharist (more said at 7.00am than at the 9.00am Family Service), as the church's primary collective act of thanksgiving to God, especially for the gift of Jesus.

This week: The Sermon on the Amount!

Many of you probably guessed it is about giving to the church – what may be called pledging, dedicated giving, tithing – a number of different terms are used.

There are several reasons for doing this. One is that it is a subject frequently mentioned by Jesus – more often than some would care to know, especially those who incorrectly say, "religion and money don't go together".

Of course there can be an unhealthy link – the very fact that two weeks ago I could tell a joke about an American rip-off TV evangelist, at which we all laughed, tells us that there are situations where religion is abused in relation to money. However, that should not deter us from looking at a serious subject, addressed by Jesus and others in the Scriptures, correctly separated from situations of abuse or the overworking of guilt. And we should know that nothing – not even politics, sex or money – is divorced from the practice of true faith!

Another reason is that members of Parish Council and the Property & Finance Committee have requested, from time to time, that I do so, to give teaching and guidance on the subject. Some parishioners will have thought it all through already and need no further guidance on the matter, whilst others have not thought it all through, hence a need to encourage and challenge with respect to financial giving.

In my three years here, we have not touched sufficiently on the subject. I have spoken on it before, each year as we encourage people to renew their financial pledges for the new year, and also some two years ago when the reading was from the Old Testament prophet Malachi. In particularly challenging words, it is made clear that the withholding of tithes is equivalent to robbery from God, hence the resultant failure of the people to experience the fullness of God's intended blessings! That's hard hitting stuff.

I suspect that the person who gets touchy when money is mentioned, is simply giving away the fact that they have not sufficiently come to terms with the issue. Either we are comfortable with what we do with our money, including our giving to God, or we are not.

If we are comfortable, we may still be open to hearing of a new / different / additional need, and if able to, we can decide if we will respond to it. If able, well and good, and if unable, also well and good.

But if we are uncomfortable, then every time anything remotely connected with finance is mentioned, we will get touchy. For me, that's precisely a sign that a person hasn't come to a comfortable understanding of the spirituality of money.

Not that one sermon will bring that about. And there are several aspects to tithing that I have left out this morning, some of which will be addressed later in writing to answer questions

people sometimes ask. But my intention is that we aim to bring our attitudes and practices into line with those taught by the Scriptures, recording the words and deeds of the prophets, apostles, and Jesus.

It should be noted that the few readings chosen for today are not the obvious ones to have had. We could have heard Paul clearly saying, "God loves a cheerful giver", or "Each one should decide in their heart what to give, and do it..." Or we could have read from Old Testament injunctions to give a tenth of one's income to enable the Temple to function and the priests to do their work – and criticisms of those who fail to honour this requirement.

But that would turn into a Bible study, which is not our purpose here this morning. Rather, our readings locate the matter within an understanding of God's goodness to us.

Psalm 106, though long, included a reminder to the people of God of God's historical goodness towards them – and his ongoing mercy in spite of people turning from God or failing to acknowledge his saving interventions.

Canticle 1 gave us a Song of David, used over 3,000 years ago, to remind us that everything comes from God.

Then we also heard the injunction from Jesus not to place such overwhelming store in earthly treasures that we neglect the treasures of the Kingdom of God. Jesus uses that telling phrase – "For where your treasures are, there your heart will be also!" (Matthew 6)

Quite simply, the Scriptures teach and encourage the following:

- Recognition that all we have, comes from God
- Recognition that we are responsible for using all our talents and resources, including finances, for good and worthy uses, including using a worthy proportion of it to ensure that the work of God is carried out in our world
- The OT understanding was quite legalistic: A tithe (tenth). If income was not in monetary form, it was to be in another form (sale or use of livestock, fruits and crops, etc.).
- The NT understanding is less legalistic – a sense of being freed from legalistic observance of laws.
  
- [Elaborated on different approaches from different denominations and ministers... e.g. some of the newer charismatic churches which absolutely insist on a tithe for all members; the jokes told even within the Dutch Reformed Church of the diaken (deacon) coming around to check Mr. Van Zyl's new house and new Mercedes Benz, as a sign that he is doing really well but wondering aloud with him why his tithe hasn't increased.) Yet we don't take such an invasive approach in our church or our culture.]
  
- My approach: If something is not absolutely prescribed, I find difficulty in laying it down as if it were prescribed. Therefore I cannot insist that people MUST use a 10% standard for their giving.
  
- But quite why the work of God should land up worse off under the New Covenant of Jesus Christ than it was under the Old Testament religious law, is beyond me!
- We are free from legalistic living indeed – free to live lives generously, acknowledging the goodness of God towards us in the first place.
- So one person may respond by saying "thankfully, if there's no law about it, I can get away with giving a small amount".
- But another may respond by saying, "if there's no law about it, I am free to give a higher percentage, if I am able to do so"!
  
- The Scriptures speak consistently about a proportionate giving of our income. It is spoken of as a requirement for the believer. Not a polite request, a case of "...if it feels right for you", but a requirement.
- [It is not a requirement of the non-believer – which has implications also for those who belong to a church but whose spouses are the primary or sole income earners yet do not belong to the church / seek affiliation with it.]
  
- If proportionate giving to the church is a requirement of the believer, those not yet at that level of giving need to be challenged to reconsider the matter, and why their giving is not yet in line with biblical teachings. They need to consider ways of growing in faith and in the practice that flows from that.
  - If that applies to you, deal with it! Think about it, read about it, ask someone knowledgeable a question about it, or discuss your particular circumstances with somebody who will be helpful and understanding – without sending you on

a guilt-trip.

- Obviously the unemployed or poverty-stricken person has to consider the matter from an entirely different vantage point to that of the well-off family with two cars, perhaps even two homes, and well-clothed children in good schools! There is no sense of judgement or condemnation on the person obviously unable to tithe.
- But even the fiscally challenged are able to consider other means of giving – including time, knowledge and labour, remembering that there is no law of 10%, but rather a call to proportionate giving of income as one is able to.
- As has been pointed out to me by several people on fixed pension incomes, they are now not in a position to tithe as they may have been when fully employed, but have chosen to add a bequest to their wills, enabling them to give either a fixed amount or a percentage to the church after their death. As one man said with a smile, “Why leave it all to my kids?” Several in this parish have notified us that they made such an arrangement, showing that there are creative ways of handling giving!
- The work of the church is not funded by some mythical huge pot of gold. Nor are we connected to the Vatican, unfortunately, in the case of those who cynically like to say that there are vaults underneath the Vatican holding priceless art treasures that should be sold!
  - [However - we will have a Hilton Artists’ Exhibition during August for church funds, so if YOU have art treasures hidden in your vaults, you are welcome to bring them out.]
- Instead, our funding, enabling the church to do its work in many different areas, comes from you and me.
- I include “me” on purpose, because on a few occasions talking about tithing, it has surprised people to learn that I tithe too. “You’re the priest - why do you tithe?” they say. And why not? I’m no different to anyone else in my responsibility for the work of the church. I give proportionately from my income, like anyone else is expected to, even though I happen also to be paid by our Anglican church to work in a particular way as its priest here.
- I work it out on my income (cash and partially “in kind” seeing as I live in a church house), and I try to maintain a level of approx. 10% of income.
- Years ago, before we had children and when Julia was working fulltime at JHB-salary rates, we chose to give a higher percentage. That is not bragging, just the choice we made, as part of our response of thanks to God – and in response to what we believe was the challenge of Jesus for us at the time. We had a comfortable lifestyle, without anything ostentatious, and regarded it as literally “putting our money where our mouths were”!
- However, talking about money is not a case of “singing for my supper”. What you and I give is certainly indirectly connected to clergy pay, but that comes from what all parishes pay to the diocese, and not to each priest directly from their own parish.
  - All clergy are paid the same, irrespective of where we live or how long we have served, and we do not earn large salaries. That is not for me to discuss further here, suffice to say that some, on learning what clergy receive in pay, have been shocked, having believed it to be far higher. We are looked after in all sorts of ways, but are certainly not highly remunerated, and no priest with a family in this environment would manage unless they had a spouse earning more – so get rid of that myth if you still have it.
- Most importantly for me, I tithe, believing in what I do. I do so, honouring God, and trusting God. I do it neither blindly nor foolishly, for I have godly responsibilities towards my wife and children to fulfil. Nor do I give falsely, out of a poor theology that says something like, “if I give more, God will bless me with the Lotto winnings one day”! [Well I wouldn’t mind... J ]
- But I do so because it is an investment, and want to close with a quotation in that vein...

Tithing is about knowing and responding to God’s prior generosity to us, and understanding our God-given responsibility towards ensuring that the mission of the church is fulfilled. Tithing does not begin with a chequebook – it begins with the heart and spirit, understanding that ultimately WE belong to God, and by implication, so do our resources.

**From the book by Nicky Gumbel, "A Life Worth Living", pp. 128 – 129.**

"This spiritual principle applies to everything in life. Whatever we give to the Lord, he multiplies, whether it is our time, home, gifts, ambitions, or money. The return on our investment is not necessarily financial; rather we are investing in people. We see lives changed, people coming into the kingdom of God, the hungry being fed, the naked clothed, drug addicts set free, marriages restored and the sick healed. Every time we hear a report back from a work in which we have invested, we are reaping the reward for our investment. For the most part, we will have to wait until heaven to see the harvest, but we get occasional glimpses of it here and now, as a foretaste.

The New Testament principle is that if we want treasure in heaven, we have to send it on in advance. What will the reward in heaven be? I don't know, but I suspect we will see the faces of those we have unknowingly helped. We will hear them say, "I became a Christian partly as a result of your gift," or, "My marriage was restored"... (or "I was comforted when in trouble"). Not only will we see their faces, but also we will see the face of Jesus. We get a foretaste of this now, which is why in giving generously it is not only the recipients who are blessed: we also are blessed."

Let us pray...