

The Generosity of God

[& Notes about Parish Vision]

**Church of the Ascension, Hilton
Sunday 05 October 2008
Nic Denny-Dimitriou**

Psalm 150

Ephesians 1. 1-14

Matthew 6: 24-34

[This sermon is preceded by information related to the development and implementation of our Parish Vision]

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### **Parish Vision**

Before the Sermon I need to speak about Goals and Vision for our Parish. Many of you were here one Sunday just over one month ago when a presentation of our Parish Vision was made on behalf of our Parish Council.

During the next 6 weeks several things will take place, some of them regular events at this time of year, others being new and different, like our indication that we intend to hold a series of Parish Hall Meetings (similar to the concept of a Town Hall Meeting). Every single person or family on our Parish Membership Roll will be personally invited to attend one of these, held at different times on different days to accommodate everyone.

At these meetings, a summary presentation of our Parish Vision will be made, adding some specific goals and hopes, and people will be invited to respond, which could include comment in support of our vision or in constructive criticism of it, and raising issues of importance regarding our parish life. These meetings will be held later in October and early in November.

### **Questions / Input from all**

In our desire to be effective and faithful followers of Christ, we are asking for everyone's input. The response of every parishioner is being sought as we develop and modify our vision, re-consider who and where we are as a congregation, and how we see ourselves in the years to come. This is far too important to leave to the priest, or church council; it is a task for all of us, in discerning over time what we believe God wants of us. Some of the questions we need to ask include...

- What needs to change? What needs to be kept as it is now?
- What meets the spiritual needs of our varied congregation? In what ways are we failing to meet people's needs?
- What do we believe God wants of us – what kind of parish do we think God wants us to be in 5 years' time? And if that is different from where we are now, how do we get there?

Please take note that within a couple of weeks' time, you will all receive a phone call from someone in the parish to invite you to such a meeting. The person calling you will not be me or anyone else from the parish office, but someone phoning on behalf of your Parish Council, i.e. it will be local and personal – we've not outsourced this to a Call Centre in Mumbai ☺

Over the following Sundays in October, we will also have some questions to stimulate your critical thinking and to help you to put into words some of what you may think or feel about your church.

### **Magazine & Pledge Renewal**

A Parish Magazine will be published within a week or so, which will include some of this information. Also, as always at this time of year, it will include a letter from our Church Wardens, Gavin Bulman and Glen Crouch, inviting every parishioner to make or renew a financial pledge to the parish for 2009, enabling us to meet our basic needs, to support the work of our church in this parish and beyond, and to grow in effective ministry and service. In other words, to continue to fulfil our Parish Vision, whether it remains as it is or whether it is amended and adapted in response to our Parish Hall Meetings.

### **Thanksgiving Sunday**

Then on Sunday 2 November, we will repeat a wonderful tradition at Church of the Ascension when we hold a combined Thanksgiving Service at 8.00am, in which we all have opportunity in a variety of ways to express our thanks to God for God's goodness and for the good things we have experienced through the worship and ministry of our parish, in other words, from one another.

At the heart of our Vision is this:

**Our core purpose as the Parish of the Church of Ascension is to inspire and nurture friendship with God and each other.**

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Let us pray:

[A prayer written by a member of our Parish Council]

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for the immense comfort and security of being able to call you Father. Thank you for your endless patience, your abundant tolerance and your unfathomable compassion and love for each of us, despite our glaring unworthiness and undeservedness.

Please help us to fulfill your purpose for us as individuals and as a church. Empower us to be salt and light in our community so that all who come into contact with us may see and know the truth about Jesus. Please show us also in a powerful and clear way what your will for our own church is and fill us with a willing and enthusiastic and energetic spirit so that we may fulfill your will.

We pray this in the holy name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Sermon

Our focus today is on the generosity of God, and responding by living our lives in gratefulness for all that we have been given.

Of course, the word “generosity” can immediately bring some stereotypes to mind. Did you hear the story about the preacher, rather more focussed on money than was appropriate? In his church, they had metal chairs, not pews, and in order to increase financial giving to his church, he arranged to have wires connected to those seats and on the next Sunday he shouted, “All those willing to give R1000 to the church, stand up!” As he said this, he pressed a button and electricity zapped through the seats. As expected, there was a tremendous response... But later the sidesmen found three electrocuted Scotsmen clinging to their seats.

[Terrible thing, stereotypes ☺]

Psalm 150, said together earlier, may have been specifically written to round off a collection of songs and words of praise used 3,000 years ago in worship of God, and which the Church still uses for that purpose. It is expansive and all-encompassing in giving thanks and praise to God, who surpasses every human measurement of greatness, and it ends with rousing words: “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!”

I noted in my sermon last Sunday that God is not “fathomable” – we cannot measure the greatness of God, and the call today is to acknowledge that this same God is also an amazingly giving Being.

The enormity and 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! What is more, in Jesus Christ, God has come close to us – “God in skin” to use one of my favourite expressions – and is exceedingly generous to us.

St Paul’s opening words in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, also heard this morning, remind us of how important we are to God, who, he says, “chose us before the creation of the world” and who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Verse 7 proclaims: “In him we have forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us...”

Those are neither small nor quiet words; they are big and expansive words that say God’s grace has not simply been given to us, but has been LAVISHED on us. [“Lavish” not a word often used, but for me it conjures up an image – a useful one despite its unhealthy-ness – of cream being liberally poured over a steaming hot dessert on a cold day like today. Not just a few drops, or a little covering over the dessert, but cream being lavished...]

Today’s Gospel reading is well known to us. It is part of larger body of teaching from when Jesus went up a mountainside followed by a large crowd, and as Matthew records, Jesus began to teach them. Many subjects are covered – and he says to them [6:19ff], “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 asking us to make the Kingdom of God our priority.

Jesus is not in a 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 pagans who run after all these things and yet still have no connection to the Kingdom of God!

Talking about generosity is about far more than money. There are many passages of Scripture that address the subject, 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.

The tendency to hoard, whether a natural impulse or learned, is well established in human nature. Note 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?”

God is generous and giving by nature, so 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? To the extent that we fail to live generously, we fail to live up to our full humanity as God intended.

Generosity of living is therefore a response to God. 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 also brings blessings to the giver, not in a crudely egotistical way, but in true pleasure at being able to contribute towards the good of others and at having made an investment in the lives of other individuals and communities.

Generosity also multiplies blessings, as St Paul writes elsewhere (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 pleasing to God, from whom everything we have has come, and because it is a primary value of God’s, to be generous is to be in harmony with God’s Kingdom

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 inexhaustible riches and resources, alongside inexhaustible love. In giving lavishly, 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; and God has continued to act generously towards us even when we remain indifferent or take God’s gifts for granted.

So too, our giving may at times be from excess, and may at times be sacrificial, like the exhausted parent who spends yet another night attending to a sick child.

To conclude...

May generosity grow in us as a continual response to God who continuously pours life and love into us, lavishing us with gifts, and has never once sat back and said, "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!"

I want to encourage us to live 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.

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