

'Love gives' - St Peter's 2015 Stewardship Initiative
Sermon for 1st February - 'Love gives: certainly'

The title for our 2015 Stewardship initiative is, as you may have already picked up, 'Love gives'. When you see the 'L' written in 'Love gives' in our literature and leaflets, it will always be with a capital 'L'. Why? Because God is Love with a capital 'L' – and it is through love that God, the source of all life and all being, gives. 'God gives....' – God gives life, God gives light, God gives love...and, above all, God gives us himself in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ. So, when you hear or read the two words 'Love gives', I invite you first to think of God....and of God as the superabundant giver. So 'Love gives: certainly' can be transformed into 'God gives: certainly' – certainly in that Christians throughout history are clear that God – who gives over-flowingly - has given himself and spoken certainly in the person and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

But our interpretation of 'Love gives' isn't going to stop with 'God gives': for Christians, being people who believe all human beings are made in and reflect the image of God, have a tradition of being people who themselves give. We give to God and we give to the beings of God's creation. That is our calling. Giving, in God's eyes, is to be our privilege, our responsibility and – and our joy. As God gives 'certainly', so we are called to give 'certainly' too – to give firmly, with resolve and with confidence.

'Love gives: certainly'. Let's take a look at our Gospel story in the light of that phrase. Remember how both Simeon and Anna see in a tiny baby, just 40 days old, God giving himself to the world in an entirely new way? They see that God is giving 'certainly' – in the unambiguous, unvarnished expression of himself and of Love that is the person and vulnerable life of Jesus Christ.

Now let's shift our focus from God giving 'certainly' to people giving 'certainly': because one way of looking at the story of **Simeon and Anna** is to identify them as **people who gave 'certainly'**. The drama Luke builds is of two people who have been looking for a long time for God to act. Both have been looking forward with confidence for God's Saviour to come in their lifetime. Luke describes Simeon as a bit special, someone to whom it had been revealed 'by the Holy Spirit, that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah'. With this knowledge and trust, we could say that Simeon's eyes were 'certain'. Simeon was blessed with a deep, confident conviction that, at some point as he looked around, he would see the Messiah. With a 'certain' look, he would see God's unique and generous salvation right before him.

And so Luke tells us that, giving his time to God, Simeon is in the Temple at the right time and the right place to see with clarity and proclaim to Mary and Joseph with certainty: 'Here, in this tiny baby, is God's salvation and light for the world'. And then Luke reflects God's constantly revolutionary activity by maintaining gender balance in his narrative and telling how a woman, Anna, over 84 years old, joins and matches Simeon in identifying God in Jesus with equal certainty. Interestingly, she doesn't just confirm Jesus' identity with Mary and Joseph. She goes a step further. Anna gives time and effort 'to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem' i.e. giving a lot of time to a lot of people. **Anna's response was both certain and generous.**

Responding to God's self-giving generosity with the certainty and generosity of time and talent that we see in Simeon and Anna is surely quite a challenge for us today. Indeed there are theologians who, when asked 'what's the biggest challenge facing the church today?' reply **'The biggest challenge facing the church today is...the super-abundancy of God....we can't get our heads around the generosity of God's love, mercy and commitment to wayward humanity'**.

So we might ask: Is it possible for us to be as faithful as Simeon and Anna today? Is it possible for us to give our time and talent as concentratedly as they did? Is it possible for us to see and respond to God's love with such certainty as they did? Well, it seems to me that God's call and God's gift of strengthening power for us to witness to God with the same certainty and generosity that we see in Anna and Simeon is alive and well in our own day.

Take a person who is hitting the headlines fairly frequently at the moment: Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Think of the radical shift in the use of his time and talents that responding to God's love and light

appearing in Christ has brought to him. There he was occupying an ever more senior role in the oil industry when he discerned a call from God to take a different path – to leave his highly paid, all the comforts and trimmings life and offer to become a curate and then a priest in the Church of England. Ordained just 20 years ago, God has put Justin Welby's skills and talents to great use, as Justin himself as offered himself to be directed by the Holy Spirit. We now seem to have the most effective, 'right for our time' leader of the Anglican Church in many a long year.

Take someone who is part of St Peter's Church today. Our curate, Iain McColl, was, for fifteen years, a lawyer, accustomed in latter years to negotiating and handling contracts involving millions of pounds. Again, challenged to respond to the love and light of God revealed in Jesus Christ, Iain offered to use his time and talents in a completely different way – but in a way to which his previous experience would always make a significant contribution. His candidature for ordination was duly confirmed by assessors in Bristol and Cambridge – and so we are benefiting both from this revolution in his life and from his many skills today. In fact such is the 'good fit' being ordained feels to him that Iain said to me back in the Autumn 'I wish I'd started this four years earlier!'

And here's one more very topical example of someone responding to the love and light of God revealed in Christ: if I say the name 'Libby Lane', who do you see? Someone who embodies a radical development in the life of the Church of England. Someone who represents the church, I believe, being more faithful to God's call. Someone who herself has responded to God's love by using her time and talents with clarity and certainty in God's service. Libby Lane became, of course, last Monday, the first woman in history to be consecrated a bishop in the Church of England.

This is how the Church Times describes her path to her present position in an interview published last week: 'When she was at the Keswick Convention (a long-standing Christian summer camp in the Lake District) at the age of 15, she responded to an invitation to those who felt called to full-time service to come forward for prayer. What she had in mind was to follow the family tradition of working as a civil engineer, helping to build roads, bridges and infrastructure in the developing world, as part of a missionary calling. From very early on, she says, she felt that the least she could do with her life was 'to offer it back to Christ in response to what he has given me...'

'My own Christian faith' she says 'has always had in it that sense of – if this is what I believe of Jesus, that he took my flesh and lived our life, and gave himself for me on the cross; and that sacrifice has made me new, and forgiven my sins, and given me the hope of eternity by the power of the resurrection – what else can I do but give everything that I am and have in his service?'

So: there we are. Three examples of people in this country, in our time and around us responding to the love and light of God revealed in Christ with a wholeheartedness and certainty that reflects that of Simeon and Anna. We have three examples of people reflecting on the right use of their time and talents in the light of their faith in Christ and in response to God's call to all humanity to use our time and talents in his service, for the building up, in the power of the Holy Spirit, of God's kingdom.

How are you using your time and talents? What shift in priorities and practice might God be calling you to make? How could the stewardship of your life be developed so that you respond more faithfully, more generously and more certainly to our super-abundantly giving God?

These are the questions our 'Love gives' 2015 Stewardship initiative sets before you. Please, please, please think about them for yourself. Read the copies of this and later sermons on paper or the web. Listen to them (we hope!) on MP3 or on line. Book for the House Groups which will tackle these exact questions. Above all: get involved – engage with 'Love gives', so that all of us might respond to the gift of God to the world of Jesus with that firmness and certainty which we see in Simeon, Anna of old – and in Justin, Iain and Libby today.

Let us pray: Lord, bless our 'Love Gives' initiative. Help us respond to your call to give our time and talents to your service, no matter whether your call asks for small or radical changes from us. Our giving cannot hope to match the power and quantity of your generous love: but may we open our hearts to be changed in the power of your Holy Spirit that we might give in appropriate and faithful response to the way you give to us. Amen.