

Sharing God's Riches: Sermon 3 'The Giving Stairway' by Mark Pilgrim

In the first sermon in this series on Giving, Sarah took us to Africa. She delivered the message that everything comes from God and of God's goodness do we give back with the powerful image of a cup located in the crevice of a Victoria Falls-like waterfall. The cup brims over with water for those below it – but the fount of this generosity is not an infinite reservoir of water within it: the giving happens because the cup is receiving and passing on the water streaming continuously from above. This image depicts in graphic form the words we say half way through almost all Communion Services, after the Collection: 'All things come from you, O Lord, and of your own do we give you.'

Then last week Caroline invited us to be with her on her first trip to Africa. We shared her misery on returning from a medical call to a burnt and melted Sony Walkman: another graphic illustration, this time of the perils of our treasure being where our heart is. Caroline went on to encourage us to sit lightly to our possessions - not to grip tightly onto what we think of ours but to open our hearts and our hands gladly, cheerfully releasing what we are entrusted with to extend God's kingdom.

In this third and final week I start by inviting you to join me on a walk up and down a long, stone stairway in the Lake District. The one I'm thinking of starts behind the New Dungeon Ghyll Hotel in Great Langdale and climbs 1200 feet criss-crossing a stream all the way to Stickle Tarn, beneath Pavey Ark and the Harrison Pikes. 20 years ago there was a bit where you had to scrabble up a small stretch of near vertical rock. The path with many steps cut into the ground simply stopped and you had to make your own way for 20 to 30 feet to the top.

These days the path has been upgraded. There is now a continuous, well maintained stone staircase from bottom to top. Which has its pluses and its minuses! An advantage is that the path is clear and firm throughout. A problem is that there's less excuse to stop. And then you encounter another issue: while you think going up is harder than coming down, when it comes to descending a 1200 foot staircase, your knees and legs can get exhausted by the constant knocks and extra stretching. Going up you might arrive hot and out of breath: coming down you can find, by the end, your legs have turned to jelly. There's a challenge in travelling the stairway, whichever way you go!

Now I invite you to contemplate the picture on the right. As you can see, it's a double stairway. You can put yourself at the bottom or the top. You can put yourself somewhere in the middle. If you're really agile you might be able to jump up, down or across some steps – and, if you've got really long legs (and actually I think, in this case, many of us probably have) it's possible to have your legs on different steps so that part of you is in one area and other aspects of your life are in another.



It's 'The Giving Stairway' and my concern now is to offer some specific thoughts on how, wherever we place ourselves, we might all take a step forward on the staircase of 'Christian Giving'.

First let's establish the recommended goal. The Church of England challenges its members to give 5% of their after-tax income to and through the church and 5% to other work that helps build God's kingdom. Such an approach is a contemporary way to tithe – to give our first fruits, a tenth of our income – in a planned, committed, thought-out manner – as a personal contribution to the furtherance of the Holy Spirit's mission across the world. If your giving at the moment is not planned, committed or thought-out or you believe you still have room to develop in one or more of these areas, then come with me.

The Christian Giving stairway begins with the step marked **'Survival'**. What characterises Christian Giving at this point? An approach like this: **'I do my bit when I am asked to help'** With this support the church can survive...for a while maybe...but if everyone took this view, surely not for long. For those on the Survival step, it's pertinent to ask 'Is God calling you to more?' The next step is marked **'Shopping'**. What characterises Christian Giving at this point? A consumerist approach like this: **'I pay for the bits I enjoy and find meaningful'**, which, if everyone took this view, might allow God's mission to be resourced for a little while – but surely not for long! For those on the Shopping step, it's pertinent to ask 'Is God calling you to more?'

Next we move to the **'Support'** step. Here the traveller says **'The Church is important and I will give it my support'**. While very helpful, large one-off donations might result from this approach, it's pertinent to ask those on the Support step 'Is God calling you to more?' At level 4 we come to **'Subscription'**. Here, as with paying dues for a club or leisure activity, Christian giving can be planned and committed – but is Church, is participation in extending God's kingdom, to be left at being akin to belonging to a Club? Here a member's approach to Christian Giving is **'I see myself as a member paying my dues'**. But for those on the Subscription step, it's pertinent to ask 'Is God calling you to more?' One step on from 'Subscription' is **'Submission'**. The person at this point may say **'I am trying to be a good disciple with all that it involves'**. Their giving might include nearly all the characteristics our church recommends: it's thought out, planned and a particular proportion of income ...and yet, for those on the Submission step, it's still pertinent to ask 'Is God calling you to more?' And now we reach the sixth step. It's the step marked **'Sacrifice'** and the Christian at this point is making their giving a priority that is perhaps a little or even way beyond rational explanation: it's the allocation of resources to kingdom-building work which people located on other points of the stairway might admire but really struggle to understand.

I reckon 'Sacrificial' describes the giving of the widow we see in our Gospel this morning. Here the woman gives her all: two small coins is all she's got – and that's what she gives – sacrificially. The widow might have tried to give a tenth of her money – to give proportionately: to have done so would have attracted a commendation from Jesus for being obedient and faithful to the Law. But what does Jesus do when she puts 100% of her meagre wealth into the collection box? Does he rush across and say 'Stop!?' Does he say 'you must give proportionately – 10% of your income is what you are invited to give so 10% of your income is all you should give: anything else is forbidden?' No. Without disturbing the woman herself, he commends her action to his disciples. Why does the woman do it? What is her motivation? The Gospels do not say. We can only guess. Perhaps it's because she lives out the biblical teaching 'all things come from you, O Lord, and of you own do we give him'? Perhaps she truly trusts God has provided for her already and will always provide for her in future. What we do know is: Jesus sees and celebrates this sacrificial giving of her all.

I want to say two more things about The Giving Stairway. The first is this. One set of stairs goes up and one set of stairs comes down for this reason: as with the Lake District staircase, it's easy to assume that stairs are for climbing – that it will always be an effort; that we'll feel puffed or never manage getting to the top. So climbing the staircase of Christian Giving will take more energy and effort than we have got to give. But here's a question: What if the stairway of Christian Giving means going down rather than up? This is where you

might find the graphic with its right hand stairway coming down and Jesus situated at the bottom particularly helpful. Jesus places himself with the generous woman – as it were ‘at the bottom of the social order, at the bottom of the hierarchy’ – on the bottom rather than the top step. And thinking of taking a step forward in generous giving for us today may be easier to contemplate (psychologically, if nothing else!) if it’s a question of stepping down rather than up. The effort can still be considerable. You might find that your knees hurt or your legs feel like jelly as you take the step forward and down – but ‘down’ may feel more in the direction of the widow and Jesus in the Gospel story: a good place to be.

Our final reflection can be on the small steps visible between the vertical risers. Actually, every one of the horizontal steps could have a number of smaller steps within it. That’s because we don’t necessarily move from one step to another in one go. Our development as Christian givers may happen best by taking a number of small steps rather than a giant leap. Steady, smaller increases in giving may be most appropriate – unless, like the widow in the Gospel story, you feel drawn to do something out of the ordinary. Don’t let me stop you! Who knows – making one or more disproportionate gifts may be right for you. It may be the giving that God is calling you to.

So now, in a moment of silence, I invite you to place yourself somewhere on the Giving Stairway. Are you on the left hand one going up or the right hand one going down? Perhaps you are on one step in relation to your monetary giving and on another step in relation to the time and energy you give to the building of God’s kingdom. Is there a way you can take one or more steps towards God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, along the path, ultimately of sacrifice – or further sacrifice?

Have a think. Take this picture away with you to think and pray some more. After a time to picture where we are and where would like to be on the Giving Stairway, let’s say the prayer below the picture together.

**Loving God, we thank you for inviting us to share the goodness of your Creation.
May we recognise that all things come from you and of your own do we give you.
As our treasure is where our heart is, may our hearts be with you;
and may we take steps to grow as cheerful, sacrificial Christian givers,
in the power of your Spirit, for the growth of Christ’s kingdom, now and evermore. Amen.**