

'Sharing God's Riches'. Sermon 1: God's abundant generosity 17 February 2013

2 Corinthians 9:6-12 and Luke 12:2-31

My first ever visit to Africa was to Zimbabwe in 1990. It was the dry season and I wasn't sure what Victoria Falls might be like. Would the mighty Zambezi River be a trickle? Well, no. It was magnificent. Water poured over the edge of the many falls. A myriad of rainbows shone through the spray as the sunlight interacted with the water. The noise was tremendous. The surrounding vegetation was lush. The paths were slippery and the only nod to health and safety were some very low thorn fences that marked the edge of the path and the beginning of the gorge. Birds flitted through the trees in the rainforest. God's creation was on display in all its glory. Goodness only knows what it must be like in the rainy season. It was abundant even at its lowest ebb.

Paul describes God's love, God's grace, God's generosity, God's goodness, God's blessing and God's provision as abundant. God is lavish, he is bountiful. He is not stingy. God is the giver of life. In the same way as the water flows continuously over the edge of the gorge at Victoria Falls so does God's goodness to us. Rowan Williams explains it as 'God gives us God'. Which is pretty awesome.

If we believe that God is the creator of this world, then we also believe that everything comes from God, everything belongs to God. We don't have to go as far as Africa so see God's daily provision in wonderful things. The carpet of snowdrops I saw in a country churchyard in the pouring rain last weekend was a wonderful sight. And recognising them as heralding the beginning of the end of winter gives the reassurance of lighter and (hopefully) warmer and drier days to come. It's not just in the beauty of this planet that we see God's hand at work. If God is the giver of life then our wealth, health, intellect, family and friendships are given to us by God.

God gives us every blessing abundantly. So says Paul to the church in Corinth. But what do we think that means? In her book of Lenten exercises, the Road to Emmaus, Sister Helen Julian, a Franciscan, points out that there are two ways to be rich: to acquire more possessions and money or to want less. She commends to us the second way, the way of the gospel. In our reading from Luke's gospel, Jesus assures us that we will not go hungry or naked. God knows that we need these things. But life is more than that and we are not to make clothes, food or anything else created into treasure. Instead we should put our energy and our hearts into the service of God and into work for his kingdom.

I have a weekend away with two friends at around this time every year. It has developed into a bit of a tour of small Cathedral cities. This year was Salisbury (more of which later) and in 2009 we went to Hereford. In a tiny side chapel there are some fabulous modern stained glass windows depicting the works of the 17th century poet Thomas Traherne. He loved people, he loved creation and he loved God and his gospel. His response to the words of Jesus: 'It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom' Thomas Traherne responded: 'To know God is to know goodness, it is to see the beauty of infinite love; to see it attended with almighty power and eternal wisdom. It is to see the king of heaven and earth take infinite delight in giving. He is not an object of terror but of delight. To know him therefore as he is, is to frame the most beautiful idea in all worlds. He delights in our happiness more than we do. An infinite Lord, who, having all riches, honours and pleasures in his own hands, is infinitely willing to give them to me'. Thomas Traherne possessed very little, he lived the last 10 years of his life in someone else's home. He left a few bequests of money, and his books and his best hat to his brother. He had been rich in his appreciation of God.

And what do those riches look like? I suggest that they are those blessings of love, compassion, kindness in speech, peace and understanding. It will be good for all of us if we each sought to build up funds of love, kindness and so on. Our riches also of course include our money, and if everything comes from God then so too does my money. And the ways in which I choose to use my money should, I hope, reflect my response to God's generosity and to Jesus' injunction not to worry.

A few years ago, I couldn't understand when talking about levels of savings with some non-Christian friends why it was that I seemed to have saved so little compared with others who had a similar income. Was I a profligate spender? Did I go on grander holidays, change my wardrobe more often, go out to eat or to the theatre more regularly? Were they meaner to themselves than me? After a bit of reflection and a couple of subtle questions, I realised that I gave away much of what they were saving. That was the difference. I do save, but enough to cover the odd emergency. When I have one, I'm all spent out and I have to start saving again. I plan what I give away. It's not just that which is left at the end of each month. If it was given back to me, it would make a real difference. At times it can feel like more than I can spare. I work out how much to give and then work out how best to use that which is left over – paying off the mortgage is the priority at the moment – for I also need to be responsible with the

money that I earn and not give away so much that I have to rely on others to bail me out. It's something I have developed over the years as a response to my growing faith, a mark of gratitude to God and a commitment to contributing financially to God's work in this world as well giving my time and energies. And when I realised why I had so much less by way of savings than others, I realised also that I didn't mind. I hope that the way I decide how to give to God's mission is not like leaving a tip to God for some sort of warm spiritual feeling, nor like a club membership fee; instead I hope that it is a response to the God of love. One of the hymns I love to sing is 'When I survey the wondrous cross'. It's one of the few hymns (like 'Great is thy faithfulness' which we will sing this morning) that I know by heart. It finishes with the inspiring words: 'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all'. Doesn't that have to include the way I manage my money?

I've been trying to work out when it was that I became aware of this being a good response to the God of love and I've been reminded of my junior school headmaster. We knew him as Mr Evans the head, to distinguish him from Mr Evans the welsh (who taught us welsh). During assembly he made us learn poetry. This prayer of St Ignatius was one of them.

Lord, teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing I do your will.

To be generous and to give and not to count the cost.....

It took me many years to put it into practice, but it has stuck. I keep it under review. Paul reminds me that I must give as I make up my mind. I don't ask others what they give, compare myself to them. I give what I am able and I do so cheerfully. And it has been my experience that I have enough of everything that I need.

Last weekend I visited Salisbury Cathedral. In 2008 a new font was installed. It is a thing of great beauty. It is in the shape of a rather chunky cross, with each end tapering to a point. It is permanently positioned in the centre of the main aisle. It is permanently full of water. The surface of the water is still, from different angles reflections of the ceiling and the stained glass windows can be seen. And yet water pours from each point of the cross. The water both seems still and is constantly moving. For me it was symbolic of the welcome God gives to each of us. We are invited to immerse ourselves in his love. To be washed clean and to respond by a constant outpouring of love in return. The constant movement of the water invites me to look for blessing and to look for opportunities to be a blessing. The purpose of belonging to a community of faith, is for us to become 'transformed into the kind of people from whom goodness flows like an unceasing stream of water' (John Ortberg). Rowan Williams consecrated the font at Salisbury— you can still see the imprints of the marks of the crosses he made. He likens our response to receiving the grace of God as being like a crevice part way down Niagara Falls. 'You can't say that the crevice receives some water from the waterfall, that's too academic and abstract a way of describing being absolutely saturated and soaked by something that descends and passes on and draws you in.....There's not a great deal of point in the rocky crevice saying 'Well, I think I would like to hold on to some of this water'. You haven't really much option. It falls on you and it bounces off. It's given to us to be givers, to pass on an intensity of outpouring. Stewardship and Christian giving lies in gratitude..... Not in a sense of obligation. Real gratitude which is joy and delight has very little to do with calculating what I owe.'

Our house groups will be exploring 'Sharing God's Riches' in greater detail during Lent. There are spaces still available if you'd like to join. My prayer for all of us is that we will experience that real joy and delight of being saturated in God's love, that God's abundant blessing would enable us to share in every good work and that we would rejoice in working for God's kingdom.

Amen.

Sarah Thomas 17 February 2013.