

‘Giving in Grace’ Sermon 1 by Mark Pilgrim
How do we respond to God’s gift of treasure?
Moving from ‘shallow’ and ‘generous’ to ‘sacrificial’

When I was young my father introduced me to stamp collecting. My Godmother in South Africa used to send me parcels for Christmas and birthday. It was fun to boil a kettle and steam off the colourful stamps with springboks, elephants and other big game on them and stick these and lots of other stamps into an album.

One day my father told me his father had a stamp collection with one particularly good stamp in it. When my grandfather got too frail to collect stamps himself, his collection was stored in our house. I was told that, when my grandfather died, I would inherit the collection. Just occasionally we would get this valuable Swedish Adolphus stamp out and look at it with awe and expectation.

Ten years later, when I was in my early twenties, my grandfather died – just as I was exploring being ordained. Before training though I thought it would be a good idea to see a bit more of the world. And grandfather’s stamp collection then came in very useful. No – I resisted the temptation to use it as a route planner going by the countries with the most interesting stamps! The stamps sold at auction and, as soon as the money was in my bank, the whole lot went on a return air ticket to India.

Why India? Because I had become friends 3 years before, in 1975, with an Indian PhD student who led my discussion group during a week at Taizé in France. Sam stayed with me for a few days each year on his way to and fro from America where he was studying. In 1978 he asked ‘When am I going to come to India?’ I had no clue as to how it could happen: but then I thought ‘Kerching – the stamp collection!’ This gift gave me 6 months in India, providing me with an appreciation of life which, I pray, feeds me to this day.

Of all the gifts we have received, which, I wonder, is the most significant? Is there one which has been more useful or more valuable than any other? Is there one which we can say we have used more frequently or more effectively than any other?

How we answer this will be different from person to person. Our first thought might be to think of something physical: maybe it’s a tool in the garage or a utensil in the kitchen given by a relative. Maybe it’s a sum of money – an inheritance or windfall – which has somehow transformed the way we live. Deeper thinking might lead us to decide that our most significant gift isn’t material at all. Perhaps it’s the gift of time to get something sorted out. Perhaps it’s the gift of space to form relationships that get us to the place we are in today. With more thought we might conclude our most significant gifts are personal characteristics: things like sensitivity to other people or passion for a particular cause or patience which enables us to listen.

Whatever our gifts, the question this first Giving in Grace sermon asks is ‘How deep is our response to the generosity of God whom we believe places gifts in our hands for his service?’

First of all, we should recognise that the depth of response will vary both from person to person and within the person themselves. It’s entirely possible for people who believe that Christ is a full expression of God’s will on earth to do very little visible in response. At one extreme this would include, faithful Christians who are severely paralysed: at the other extreme would be those who are perfectly capable of sharing their gifts of time, talent and treasure with others but choose not to. The power of selfishness to distort and distract people from doing God’s will needs to be reckoned with by Christians. Selfishness does obscure and prevent us using our gifts of time, talent and treasure in God’s service – sometimes more in the area of treasure than in relation to time and talent. Analysts say that, across the church, poor Christians often give a larger proportion of their income to God’s work than wealthier church attenders. Why might this be? One reason is that relatively wealthy Christians like us are as prone as non-Christians to use our time and talents to defend and then maximise our treasure: that’s the nature and effect of sin. Those of us in this group then give to God a bit of what is left over, after our other life priorities have been fulfilled. How might we characterise the depth of this response to God’s provision of gifts? Might it be fair to call it something between ‘thin’ and ‘shallow’?

A second depth of response to the entrusting of gifts for God's service could be said to be 'constant and generous'. So much of the Christian volunteering done in the church and local and wider community falls into this category. Time, talents and treasure are channelled continuously into good causes by people keen to live out their Christian faith in their ordinary life. Of course, the level of response might not be the same across all areas: very busy people who find themselves in receipt of a lot of money could, in some eyes, be 'shallow' in respect of the offer of their time and talents – but generous in respect of their treasure. An example of this – though not specifically Christian – could be Bill and Melinda Gates. The richest couple in the world give vast amounts of their wealth away to fund the eradication of malaria and support health care in the poorest parts of the world. It would be hard to describe the use of their treasure, regardless of their motivation, as anything other than generous. Other people, however, find themselves using their talent array differently – perhaps generous with their time and talents but disproportionately shallow with their treasure. How do we judge our own use of time, talents and treasure? Generous in all areas? Shallow in all areas – or a mixture of both. And, if a mixture, which has the scope for moving from shallow to generous: time, talent or treasure?

But there is still another level - beyond that of generous. There is a quantum leap in God's giving that is embodied in Jesus which we are invited to embody in our own lives. Here I am thinking of the S word: 'Sacrifice'. Christianity has something distinctive and unique about it compared to other world religions. It's this: God shows us, by entering the experience of humanity through Jesus, that the way to find life is to lose it, the way to find life is to die to self, the way to find life is through the sacrifice of all that one is and all that one has. Words from David in our Old Testament reading that we shall ourselves say in a few minutes emphasise that, despite appearances, we don't actually own anything:

as 2 Chronicles 29 puts it 'all things come from you and of your own do we give you'. The truest, most accurate reflection of God's giving to us is contained not in the word 'generous' but in the word 'sacrificial'. 'You first – me second': 'others first – me last'; 'God first – and all our priorities being seen in the light of God's priorities'. That's sacrifice – and being sacrificial is what, I suggest, we are all bidden to be, not only with our time and talents but with our treasure too.

There are three sermons to come in this Giving in Grace series. Each will explore the theological background to the use of our financial resources or treasure as disciples of Christ in different ways. Each will be connected to a passage from Mark's Gospel. You can see the theme of sacrifice at the heart of this sermon in Mark's account of the Feeding of the 5000: Jesus sacrifices time to teach and feed his followers and some of his followers sacrificed their resources, offering them to Jesus in a way which sees everyone fed with food left over. These passages are the basis for the Giving in Grace House Groups that St Peter's leadership encourages you to participate in, before or during Lent, one of them starting tomorrow.

I end now with this challenge: if we currently express our faith in Christ by giving money to God's mission through St Peter's sporadically, for instance by putting money in the plate when it's in front of us but not at others, can we move to an expression which is more constant – by transferring from being a plate giver to becoming a planned giver? Just by the regularity with which planned giving takes place, our giving will become more constant and more generous. And if we express our faith in Christ by giving money through the planned giving scheme, is there scope, with prayer and courage, to take a step from generous to something like sacrificial giving?

I encourage you to ponder and pray about these questions. After a moment of quiet I'll end with an adapted version of the prayer of Ignatius of Loyola:

Teach us, good Lord,
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 sacrifice and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your will. Amen.