

One of the features I have come to really appreciate about the way our readings from the Bible are ordered each Sunday is the facility it affords us for a sequential reading of various books of the Bible. So this year, during this Season of Trinity, in addition to our reading of Mark's Gospel, in our Old Testament reading we are following the story of David. We have read of his anointing by Samuel and the conflict with Goliath. Today we have read of the battle that finally saw him displace Saul as King, and the mixed emotions as he mourns the death of Saul and his beloved friend Jonathan, son of the former King. It is a very human story in which the various strengths and frailties of David are presented to us.

We are also reading through a number of the Epistles; these letters to the early Churches that dealt with the various issues facing these evolving Christian communities as the Gospel moved out from its Jewish origins and out into the Graeco-Roman gentile world.

At the moment we are reading the second letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthian was in many ways a very vibrant Church, showing many signs of spiritual growth and vitality, highly prizing the various gifts of the Spirit. It was in other ways a troubled and divided Church; different factions showing allegiance to different leaders; divided also on socioeconomic lines so that even in the central act of the sharing of the bread and the wine some were being marginalised.

In the passage we have read today, Paul is dealing with the issue of the collection he is taking up among the Churches he is associated with for the relief of the Church in Jerusalem. He has pointed out the generous response of other Churches, far poorer than the Church in Corinth.

We all know our own response when a collection is being taken up for something – say a presentation when someone is leaving work. What is expected? How much is everyone else giving – after all I don't want to look mean but I don't want to go over the top.. Paul is not so much looking at the amount of the gift as the attitude of mind behind the gift.

Back in the early 80's I was working in Finglas. Finglas Parish had been one of the first of the Parishes in the Church of Ireland to embrace the concept of Christian Stewardship. People were encouraged to review their commitment on an annual basis with a Stewardship Renewal Service being held each year. So each year I used to write to each family in the Parish. As I wrote my first letter, I detailed the various commitments facing the Parish, the ongoing bills and asked people to reflect on this as they decided on their response. A few days later I was in the Mater Hospital visiting the man who had headed up the initial campaign some twenty years earlier. 'I read your Stewardship letter.' A pause. 'I didn't think much of it!' Slightly taken aback, I asked him what was wrong with it. I have often reflected on that reply ever since. 'Christian Stewardship,' he said, 'is not about paying bills it is about being thankful.'

It is about being thankful. That is at the heart of what Paul is talking about in the Epistle:

‘For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich’. *2 Cor 8.9*

My Christian life, my Christian witness is fundamentally about being thankful – an ongoing, daily, thankfulness, in the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, for all that we have experienced of God's self giving, redeeming love in Christ.

As I heard it said recently, ‘The attitude is gratitude’ An attitude of heart and mind that informs changed attitudes, changed priorities, changed hearts and minds. In short, a totally different view of life that is rooted in our faith in Christ and what he has done and continues to do.

As the people languished in Babylon, far from the city of Jerusalem, the Temple that stood at the heart of their understanding of themselves as a people before God lay in ruins, the great prophets began to speak words of new hope, new beginnings for a renewed people. The people who are to return are to be a different people to those taken off into captivity. God is to put a new heart into his people; his commands to be written not on the tablets of stone as before but on the very hearts of the people.

So Paul goes on to tell his readers:

‘¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something – ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has’ “ *Cor 8.10-12*

I think that is what the man in Finglas was driving at when he said, ‘Christian Stewardship is not about paying bills, it is about thankfulness’