

SERMON FOR ST JOHN'S CO-OPERATING PARISH

19TH JULY 2015

Theme: Generosity

READINGS: Psalm 30:1-5, 11 & 12

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Matthew 20:1-16

Sometimes someone, who is not as socialised as others, does something externally that reflects the internal struggles we all have. That's the art of the clown, actually.

When I worked at a City Mission, many years ago, one such incident happened and I have never forgotten it. The offering plate was being handed around and it came to a young man called Martin. Martin very reluctantly pulled two coins from his pocket – 5c and 50c. And then the debate began. At one point he lowered the 50c almost into the plate only to snatch it up and lower the 5c piece. Then his better nature got the better of him and he snatched that up and lowered the 50c piece again, but just as it almost landed in the plate he snatched it away and lowered the 5c piece again. Finally, after an agonizingly long time, the 5c piece won!!!

Martin externalized an internal struggle most of us have – generosity versus carefulness, sometimes sensibleness, or maybe miserliness. Most of us are just too well socialised to play that struggle out publicly.

Today we're looking at the fruit of the spirit called generosity and that takes us right into the world of economics. Now, if this was my previous parish, at this point there would not only be a slight snigger in the congregation, there would be a burst of uncontrollable laughter. You see, if I'm confronted with a balance sheet, or a set of figures, a certain look passes over my face. It could be called bewilderment; but it's actually terror. So my talking about economics is, frankly, ridiculous. But that's what I want to do today.

The simplest way to understand economics, it seems to me, is to see it as a barter system – you give me this and I'll give you that. My family needs milk and your family needs wool, so if you give me your cow I'll give you my sheep.

Even at its most sophisticated, if you break it down, it can still be seen in this way. You want a TV set, then you give me so much money for it and it's yours. I need this work done for my business so if you give me your time and expertise, I'll pay you this much. A simple exchange – you give me this and I'll give you that. The Latin for it is “quid pro quo” – something for something: a fair exchange, except that it often isn't. Other factors worm their way in that distort that simple equation and that's where exploitation creeps in. For instance, the needier the person the less bargaining power they have so the stronger party can get away with a very unfair exchange. For just that reason the Trade Aid movement, amongst others, was developed to find a way round this unfair exchange.

Basically, when it's just, it's a fairly good way of organizing an economy. Paul agreed with it. He stated that a labourer was worthy of their hire.

But this kind of economy is not confined only to the market place and that's where it begins to unravel. We also apply it to relationships. We just need to examine our language to see that.

Think of some of the phrases we use. “What goes round comes round.” “I'll ask so-and-so, he owes me one.” “She didn't deserve that” or “He got what he deserved.” “I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine,” which is what the old boy network is based on.

On the theological level we also hear such an economic system referred to. “I must have done something bad to deserve this” said in relation to suffering. “She deserves all the blessings she gets” said of a saint.

Even within family relationships this way of thinking is expressed. “After all I've done for you, and you treat me like this!” And, of course, the final word – cutting someone out of ones will because of some hurt received.

We are absolutely conditioned in the “quid pro quo” way of thinking. The whole construct of our lives is based on this economy – something for something.

But it's not Biblical. In fact, even in the Old Testament, such a view was challenged. In particular the year known as the Jubilee year was a radical readjustment of this usual economy. Every seven years was to be a “rest” year: a Sabbath for the land when there was to be neither sowing

nor pruning taking place. But the Jubilee year was the Sabbath of Sabbaths and only happened once in a life time for most people, if at all.

On the 50th year a ram's horn was sounded throughout the land and life was turned upside down. Slaves were set free; debts were forgiven; and any family whose land had been sold during the past 50 years was able to reclaim it and return to it.

Can you imagine the chaos if we returned to that concept. But the purpose was very important. The purpose of the Jubilee year was to remind the people that ultimately everything was a gift from God and that we could neither earn nor possess anything. God's generosity was behind everything.

Significantly, when Jesus began his public ministry, recorded in Luke 4:18-19, he stated that he had come to declare a Jubilee.

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”*

Whether it was actually a Jubilee year, a Sabbath of the Sabbaths, is not stated, but that was immaterial. The message Jesus came to bring was a Jubilee message – freedom from poverty, enslavement, blindness, oppression – so that the balance of life was restored with God at the centre, the giver of all good things.

This different economy, this upside down economy, was expressed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 when he was addressing the church in Corinth about giving. They were not to give in order to outdo anyone. They were not to give out of guilt. They were not to give because they'd been brow beaten into it. The only reason to give was out of a response to the economy of God. Verse 9:

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor,
so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

There's no quid pro quo in that equation. There is "something for something" but it's completely lopsided: the one who was rich became poor so that the poor could become rich. This is an upside down economy. It's God's economy.

To make this abundantly clear Jesus told one of his most provocative parables. It provokes a sense of outrage in all of us. The workers who had laboured all day in the discomfort of the intense mid-day heat, expected to be justly rewarded. They were not. They received exactly what they had been told they would receive when they were hired but no more than those who worked in the vineyard for barely an hour at the end of the day. And when they disputed this they were left with a question, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

This parable rocks us to the core. We find that kind of generosity outrageous, impractical and blatantly unfair. But Jesus told it to tell us a truth and the theological implications are huge.

We are so deeply immersed in the economy of this world, the "pay back" system, the quid pro quo kind of thinking, that it has even coloured our thinking about God. If I do this, God will do that. If I live a righteous life, God will reward me. If I pray fervently, God will honour me. If I give generously, God will bless me. Worse still, we rank others on our spiritual scales and determine whether they are worthy or not; even whether they should be called Christian or not, especially if they happen to have theological opinions that differ from mine. We expect to be rewarded for getting things right and we expect others to be punished for getting things wrong and we are affronted by the idea that this might not be so.

But the economy of God challenges that way of thinking. We find ourselves faced with that searching question, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Somehow we have to get our heads around the fact that no matter what we do – "even if I give up my body to be burned" – it will bring us no more rewards than any other child of God, no matter how flawed they may be in our eyes.

God's grace has no limits. It is not doled out, more here and less there, depending on behaviour, doctrinal belief or anything. It is free, generous

and global. It is completely contrary to our usual way of thinking: absolutely counter cultural.

Does that mean that anything goes? That it doesn't matter what we do or what we think? That it doesn't matter whether we read the Bible or pray or do good works?

Let's put it this way. If we do those things in order to ingratiate ourselves to a God who needs pleasing and placating, and who we hope will give us something in return, then we would be doing them from entirely the wrong motivation. They would be conditional. But if we do them out of a response to God's enormous generosity to us, out of desire to learn more, to grow closer to the Source of Love, to be transformed by God's spirit into living reflections of that love, then we will do them because we want to and not out of any sense of guilt or compulsion. And the fruit would be generosity of spirit. Gone would be the nit-picking criticisms. Gone would be the judgements and the scape-goating. Gone would be any sense of self-righteousness and gone would be any sense of unworthiness.

Some months ago I was called to the bedside of a person I knew quite well. She was in a lot of emotional pain – almost torment, you might say. She was terminally ill and knew she was dying. In the past she had done some things that were less than the best. She'd hurt people; failed people; damaged people and she was tormented by the thought that she was utterly unworthy to be in God's presence. She was tearful and afraid. Together we explored her sense of unworthiness and asked the question, "Who could possibly be worthy of God's love? What would you have to be and do to earn the kind of love God offers us?" As we talked of God's incredible generosity, of the unconditional nature of God's love, of the unbelievable expansiveness of it, we were able to see that nobody could ever be worthy of God's love. Therefore the only worthy response we could make was grateful acceptance, simple trust and resting in God's presence. I was with her some time later when she died and she died with the absolute knowledge that she was going home to her Maker, who brought her to birth and in whose arms she died.

This parable is radical stuff. It turns everything upside down. No wonder Jesus was hated by the most religious people of his time. It's so much easier to have life governed by a set of dogmas that must be adhered to than to simply respond from the heart to the overwhelming grace of God so generously given that it has no boundaries.

TIME WITH THE CHILDREN

Today we are looking at the word generosity, which is quite a big word, but it basically means “sharing.”

I’m really good at sharing. You know how we are all good at some things – singing, running, writing, maths etc – well, I’m good at sharing. So I thought I’d like to share something with you this morning.

I love pinky bars, so I brought one to share with you guys. Trouble is I don’t quite know how to do it. I suppose I could chop it up into little bits but I forgot to bring a knife. It wouldn’t be very hygienic if we all took bites of it. I don’t quite know how to...

Oh dear! What has happened to my pinky bar? It’s all gone! I really meant to share it with you because I’m really good at sharing, but I just didn’t know how and while I talked about it, it disappeared.

Sometimes it’s easier to talk about sharing than to do something about sharing. Sometimes while we are busy thinking about it the opportunity goes.

Just in case you think I’m really mean I do have some pinky bars for you and, if you’re dairy free, some other lollies. Lynette will give them out a bit later on.

But I know you guys have been doing some real sharing with someone who lives a long way away in Malawi. We’re going to see the effect of that sharing on the life of that young boy called Innocent.

DVD

How did you feel when you saw what your sharing meant to Innocent and his family?

Lynette then kids.

SONG

SERMON