

Sharing what you have

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 11th April 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 112, Acts 4:32-37

Opening prayer

Master, speak! Thy servant heareth,
Waiting for Thy gracious word,
Longing for Thy voice that cheereth,
Master, let it now be heard.
I am listening, Lord, for Thee;
What hast Thou to say to me?

Frances Ridley Havergal, (1792-1872)

Introduction: a generous person

Think of a person you know – or have known – who is/was particularly generous.

What was it that made them like that?

I wonder, when you think of this person, would you say that they were generally happy or unhappy? My guess is that you'd remember them as a happy person, and, probably, a person who also knows how to express gratitude and appreciation. Could there be a connection between generosity and happiness? In our culture, we are very preoccupied with pursuing happiness, and there are lots of

voices telling us how to find it – through material comforts, through entertainment, through relationships, through self-fulfilment – being yourself and following your dream. I think that God invites us to look at ourselves another way, one that is not focussed on our own happiness at all, but which will, as a by-product, lead to our true fulfilment.

Mary of Bethany

George and I have for many years attended Spring Harvest, an annual Christian conference. This year, because of the pandemic, it's running online, and on Wednesday we were watching a talk by Ruth Valerio, who works for Tearfund, the Christian relief and development charity. Ruth was talking about the incident in Bethany a few days before the Crucifixion, when Mary poured a pint of very expensive perfume, worth a year's wages, over Jesus' feet. This crazy, extravagant act, Ruth said, was motivated by Mary's intense gratitude for what Jesus had done for her only a short time before – raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. The extent of Mary's generosity showed how much she appreciated what Jesus had done for her and her family.

Now I've no doubt that Mary was naturally of a generous disposition. But what she did was testament not only to that, but to the life-changing impact that Jesus had had on her life. And that's where I want to start in this sermon, which I've entitled "Sharing what you have" – I want to start with God, and in particular with the impact which Jesus has on our lives.

The Jerusalem church

Our bible reading today from the Acts of the Apostles comes from the early chapters where Luke is describing the church in Jerusalem, only weeks and months after the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This is not the story of a group of idealistic followers seeking to regroup after the death of their leader. This is a collection of people who are caught up in a movement of God's Spirit that is bringing more and more people to faith in Jesus as the Messiah who was crucified but has conquered death. Their lives are being transformed: they're meeting together for teaching, prayer and worship, miracles are taking place, and the new believers are living out the teachings of Jesus in new and radical ways. Today's passage particularly highlights the way in which their attitude to their possessions has changed, resulting in sharing their resources to make sure that everyone's needs are met:

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:34-35)

These people have been touched by God. They have experienced his *grace*, that is to say his undeserved love and favour, and as they have opened their hearts and minds to God's grace, his Spirit has begun to change the way they think, feel and behave.

God's grace to us

How about us? Have we too experienced the grace of God? Or, to put it another way, how different would your life be if

you weren't a Christian? Let's spend a few moments taking stock of the abundance of God's kindness to us, by looking at a few verses in the Bible. There are two ways in particular in which we, and everyone in the world, have been shown God's grace and love.

In Creation

We are, thankfully, becoming more aware of God's amazing provision for life on this planet. Many of us have watched David Attenborough's programmes on the television, and in the recent series, *A Perfect Planet*, I was struck by how integrated the various eco-systems of the world are. Everything depends on, or provides for, everything else. Psalm 104 describes how God has provided for every living thing:

These all look to you to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
(Psalm 104:27-28)

In the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul is speaking to non-Jews, he points to the evidence for the Creator God in his creation:

[God] has not left himself without a witness in doing good—
giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling
you with food and your hearts with joy.' (Acts 14:17)

One of my favourite hymns tells of God's goodness and awesome power in creation:

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the works thy hand hath made ...

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee:
How great thou art! How great thou art!¹

How often do you thank and praise God for the beauty of his creation, and for providing for us such a rich variety of resources? Try to do it at least once per day, perhaps using this or another hymn or song. It will make you a humbler and more appreciative person.

In Jesus

If God's grace and generosity in creation wasn't enough, as Christians we believe that God has shown himself to us even more wonderfully in the Incarnation – the Son of God becoming one of us, to share our life, to die and rise again so that we could have new life.

John expresses this simply in chapter 1 of his Gospel:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:14,16)

The third verse of the hymn I quoted earlier turns to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross:

And when I think that God his Son not sparing,
Sent him to die—I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin:
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee:
How great thou art! How great thou art!²

^{1,2} Stuart K. Hine after K Boberg © 1953 Stuart K. Hine/Kingsway's Thankyou Music

When we turn to Christ, ask for forgiveness for the ways in which we have disobeyed God and gone our own way, and received that forgiveness for ourselves, each of us can also experience that grace of God in our own lives. And here again, there are plenty of words written by others that we can use to supplement our own expression of gratitude to God for such amazing love for each one of us. Remember to thank and praise God every day. It will make you a more grateful person.

The example of Jesus – and Paul

Knowing God personally through Jesus will make us want to be like him. When Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, and asking them to make a contribution to the needs of the poor in Jerusalem, he referred to the example of Jesus:

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 Corinthians 8:9)

And Paul, equally, modelled a Christ-like attitude to members of churches he worked in, as shown in his address to the elders of the church in Ephesus:

“You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20:34-35)

As you may know, Paul was a tent-maker by trade, and used his income from this to fund his mission and that of his fellow church workers. I wonder if we look on our income,

whether from current paid work or from our pension or other sources, as a means of funding the spread of the gospel? Here at St Michael's we have a Family Worker Fund and a Youth Worker Fund, both separate from our general income and expenditure, and these funds are supported by a small number of church members. And don't forget that the running of this church is not paid for by some big Church of England pot, but by you and me giving from our own income.

Paul also talks about "supporting the weak", and this month our charity focus is on Tearfund, a Christian relief and development organisation whose aim is to lift people all over the world out of material and spiritual poverty. A little bit later I'm going to show a couple of short videos about their work.

But first, let's recap. I've suggested that what lies behind an attitude of generosity is a sense of gratitude and appreciation for what we've received. As we contemplate God's provision in the creation of this amazing and beautiful earth, and as we come to realise the profound love that God has shown us in sending Jesus to be our Saviour, our hearts are filled with thankfulness and we in our turn want to reflect God's kindness and grace in the way we live. The example of Jesus and of others shows us that living gratefully isn't just about feelings – it's intensely practical. It involves sharing our resources in order to enable the mission of the church and to help those in need.

An investment in yourself

One last angle on this is worth looking at too: being generous is actually *good for us*. Quite apart from making us happier people, there are spiritual blessings that we receive as a result of living generously. Here are some verses from the Bible to illustrate this:

The Book of Proverbs has a lot of wisdom about material things, including our use of money. Here's one example:

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and will be repaid in full. (Proverbs 19:17)

How about that! You give money to help the poor, or make a practical gesture of kindness, and God treats this as a loan you are making, which he will repay! Of course, this is a metaphor: don't expect to get an envelope through your door containing the amount you have given! But it's as Jesus says, "Whatever you did for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). And God will reward us for our kindness.

And what about these words of Jesus?

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.
(Luke 6:38)

So being generous with your money, or your time, energy and skills, is actually *an investment in yourself!* When and how we reap the dividends from this investment isn't certain – it can happen in many ways, both in this life and the next. But God promises to reward us. All it takes is a step of

faith. Like all investments, we have to pay out first, confident that the investment will pay off! Let's not miss out on the dividends by holding our resources tightly to our chests and refusing to let them go.

Perhaps all of the thoughts I have shared are summed up in the instructions Paul gives in his first letter to Timothy. If we are honest, most of us in this church and this area are in the category of being "rich", especially when we compare ourselves with the sort of people Tearfund are serving. Paul tells Timothy:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.
(1 Timothy 6:17-19)

"The life that really is life" is a life following Jesus, who loves us so much that he gave up his life for us. It's a life in tune with God our Father, the creator of the beautiful world in which we live. It's a life in which we discover the joy of sharing with others whatever God has blessed us with.

The next step

So what's the next step for you? What will you do today to respond to this message? One thing which we can all do straight away is to use the rest of this service to offer God our worship, our praise and our thanks, for the wonders of his creation, for his provision for us as our heavenly Father,

and for the gift of his Son to be our Saviour. And then perhaps we can make a point of praising and thanking him every day.

But what can we do practically to express our gratitude and our dependence on God? Is there a one-off act of extravagant generosity I would like to do, like Mary of Bethany did to Jesus – perhaps a gift of money, perhaps an act of kindness to another person? And looking at my life as a whole, are there ways in which I could share what I have been blessed with – my skills, my time, my money – to make a difference to the mission of the church or to those who are in any kind of need?

As I finish, I'd like to leave you with a couple of minutes to consider your answers to these questions. May God bless you as you respond gratefully to his love, and as you seek to be more like Jesus. Amen.