

Giving and Receiving

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 3rd April 2022 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Deuteronomy 15:7-11, John 12:1-8

(Fourth in the series "What is a Christian?")

Introduction: What is a Christian?

Today we come to the last in our Lent series of sermons on "What is a Christian?" Over the last few weeks we've been looking at what being a follower of Jesus looks like in practice, rather than summarising what Christians believe.

In the first week, we looked at the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler, and saw that following Jesus involves every aspect of our lives – heart and soul.

The second sermon was about being *part of the family* – the Church. Being a Christian is not just an individual thing – as we recognise God as our Father, so we also recognise other Christians as brothers and sisters, and we need to meet together to worship and pray, we need to learn from each other and support each other, because that is how we are designed.

In the third week, we looked at *living it out* – seeing the whole of our lives as an arena to serve God and others, including our work.

Last week, although not formally part of the series, the topic was God's invitation to everyone to be part of his Kingdom, using the story of the Great Feast. One definition I have

heard of a Christian is *one who has responded to God's gracious invitation to follow Jesus Christ.*

And today we come to the last topic: *Giving and Receiving.* As I was preparing this sermon, I realised that in fact it ought to be headed *Receiving and Giving*, because that is the logical order. We can only give because we have received.

Our reading from Deuteronomy reflects this. The book of Deuteronomy is full of instructions as to how the people of Israel should live "in the land that the Lord your God is giving you¹". The basis of Israel's relationship with God was that God had first chosen them to be his special people, and then had saved them from slavery in Egypt. Now he was giving them the Promised Land to live in and enjoy. Their response should be to live their lives according to his commandments. And today's reading was about meeting the needs of the poor and needy in their community, not being tight-fisted but generous.

As Christians, we have had an even more wonderful experience of God's grace. Not only do we thank him for "our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life."² We thank him for our salvation – for forgiving our sins and reconciling us to him through the death of Jesus on the Cross, for saving us from a self-centred life and making us his children, for giving us the assurance of eternal life through the resurrection of Christ at Easter, and for the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us and empower us to live for him. We

¹ Deuteronomy 15:7

² Quotation from the General Thanksgiving prayer in the Book of Common Prayer

are called to be people who give, because we have first received. As John writes, “We love because he first loved us”.

Giving to those in need is one important expression of loving your neighbour as yourself. It's been heart-warming to read of the response that many people in this country have made to the Ukrainian crisis. Yesterday George took a whole lot of nappies and tinned food to Bracknell for the Barnabas Fund collection for Ukraine, all donated by members of this church. Thank you! People do respond generously to disasters and emergencies that they learn about in the news.

But for the Christian, giving is more than being spontaneous in responding to a particular appeal. Giving is a way of life. There are many ways we can give, and for many of us today our time is one of the most valuable gifts we can give. Like anything else, our human, self-centred tendency is to fill our time first of all with all the activities that we want to do, or which benefit us, and then see if we have any time left over for volunteering in the community or in church. One of the problems that most charities and most churches face, is a shortage of volunteers. People are maybe willing to do something occasionally, but are unwilling to commit themselves. And so they miss out on the joy and satisfaction of serving God and seeing the difference that their contribution can make.

And along with giving time we could put using our talents and skills. The church is one place where we can use our time, talents and skills to bless one another, and to further the work of God's mission. There are shining examples of

people who give their time and skills willingly and sacrificially. And there are also many people who could give in this way but don't.

And now let's move on to giving money. If we think about how grateful we are to God for all that he has done for us and given us, does our giving of money to the needy and to the work of God's kingdom reflect our gratitude? Christianity is a practical religion, and it's about the whole of our lives. But many Christians haven't taken the time to *plan* how their financial resources, however small or large they are, could be used to make a real difference to the work of the Church, or to the relief of suffering in the world. Responding to a one-off appeal is all very good, but signing up to give a regular sum monthly or weekly can make a much bigger difference, and enables the Church and charities to organise and plan their programmes.

One big question is, how much should I give? The Church of England guide is to give 10% of regular income, half to your local church and half to other good causes. Everyone's circumstances are different. Many might struggle to give 10%, while others could easily give more. And while you're thinking about how you'll be squeezed by cost of living increases and higher fuel prices, bear in mind that the church and other charities will also be affected by these!

If you have not yet joined the Parish Giving Scheme, let me take this opportunity to invite you to do so. There are forms at the back of church, or you can sign up online via our website. If you'd like any help, please just ask.

Before I finish, let's take a look at our gospel story today. A dinner party is thrown for Jesus in the village of Bethany, where he had raised Lazarus from the dead. John tells us that Lazarus is at the table, and his sister Martha is serving food – showing her gratitude to Jesus in the way she knows best, giving her time and skills.

And then there's Mary, the thinker, the woman who wears her heart on her sleeve. She takes "a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard", worth a year's wages – get this, a year's wages! – and pours it over Jesus' feet. And I love the detail that John gives: "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."³ Imagine yourself in the room at the dinner. Martha is serving, people are eating, and you become aware of a beautiful smell, which gets stronger and stronger. You recognise it as the smell of nard, a very expensive perfume. Then you notice Mary by Jesus' feet, pouring this very expensive stuff over his feet. She's not just dabbing a bit on him, she's tipping it out. It's a huge extravagance. Mary is showing her love for Jesus by using a very expensive perfume to do something beautiful for him.

Immediately, she is criticised by Judas Iscariot. Surely this ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor! But Jesus defends Mary. "Leave her alone", he says. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

You may have recognised Jesus' reference to our passage in Deuteronomy, which says that there will always be poor

³ John 12:3 NRSV

people in the community⁴. So Jesus is not dismissing the needs of the poor. The passage he refers to, as we have seen, commands God's people to meet the needs of the poor. There is no conflict between giving to God and giving to other charities. It's not "either/or", but "both and".

Mary pours out her love for Jesus as a response to what he has done for her – he brought her brother back from the dead. In this service we come to the Lord's table to receive bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus' gift of himself to us on the Cross, where his body was broken and his blood shed to bring us life. We did not deserve this, and we cannot earn our own salvation. Our response to Jesus is to pour out our love for him, by giving up our lives to follow him, and to serve him through the Church and in loving service to our neighbour.

How will your giving reflect your gratitude for all that God has done for you?

Prayer

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.

⁴ Deuteronomy 15:11