

The Grace of Giving – Easter Offering

2 Cor 8:1-12; 9:13-15

Matt 28:16-20

The author, Philip Yancey, entitled one of his books, ‘Where is God when it hurts?’ – a question that all people probably ask at some time or other. Yancey says the question should be rephrased to read: ‘Where is the Church when it hurts’. Because we are the body of Christ on earth; when people hurt it is the church that should be at the forefront of offering aid. We are the hands of God to our neighbour. And those neighbours are just those nearby; they are also those in need further afield – in other parts of the world.

One of the things that Paul did on his travels was to make a collection for the Christians back in Jerusalem. The Christians in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas were going through a famine and were in great need of assistance. As Paul visits the churches of Asia Minor, he tells them that they are indebted to the Jerusalem church since that church brought them the gospel. Now they can reciprocate by making a donation to them.

Paul, I think, is rather sneaky as he says to the church in Corinth, ‘Look how generous your brothers and sisters in Macedonia have been. Surely you aren’t going to let the side down by failing to make a sizeable donation yourselves. He says straight out, ‘I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love, by comparing it to the earnestness of others.’

It seems Paul didn’t go along with the thing of ‘Don’t compare your children with each other’. These churches are his ‘children’, but he has no qualms about making comparisons. He lays it on even further by making a comparison with Jesus. ‘Though He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that through His poverty you might become rich.’

That is a message for us too. We have just been through Easter and have been reminded of the great offering by Jesus of his life for us. For our sake He became poor so that through His poverty we might become rich. So this Easter Offering is really very appropriate.

The donations by these churches to the Christians in Jerusalem, is a reminder to us that as Christians we are a worldwide body – we are joined together with others across the globe and we need to care for one another and support one another. The best way to do that is through our physical presence, but that is often not possible. The next best thing is send support in other ways, including money.

Someone has described money as our ‘other self’. It is our ‘other self’ because it can go to places to which we cannot go. We ourselves cannot be physically present in Bangladesh or Ethiopia, but part of us can go there through the gifts we give. Those gifts can fund material needs or fund others who can be there in the places we cannot be. ‘Go to all nations’, says Jesus, ‘and make them my disciples’. We may not be able to go, but we can make it possible for others to go or for our ‘other self’ to go.

The word ‘grace’ appears several times in those passages in Corinthians. This includes the lovely expression ‘the grace of giving’. Paul says, ‘In the same way that you abound in faith, in speech, in knowledge and love, so too excel in this grace of giving’. The giving that God seeks is not a giving out of a sense of duty or obligation. It should be gracious giving – giving with a spirit of generosity and love.

Elsewhere in those two chapters Paul says that ‘God loves a cheerful giver’. ‘Cheerful giver’ in many people’s minds is an oxymoron, isn’t it? You know what an oxymoron is, don’t you? Two seemingly contradictory words alongside each other. Like ‘civil service’ or ‘military intelligence’ or ‘fun run’. Cheerful giver? Not always the case, is it? More likely one puts one’s offering in the plate and as it goes down the row one looks longingly, maybe thinking to oneself what else one might have done with that money.

The grace of giving. It’s about giving willingly, with a thankful heart. It’s about giving because of the amazing grace God has shown to us. ‘Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life my all’.

Another aspect of that phrase ‘the grace of giving’ is the grace and gratitude that our generosity generates in others. Paul says ‘This service you are performing is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. In their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.’ It’s a wonderful circle – God’s grace to us generates grace in us. Out of that sense of grace we are gracious to others which generates grace and gratitude in them and results in their praise back to God. That’s a gracious circle; not a vicious circle, but a gracious circle.

Paul says of the Macedonian Christians, ‘They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service’. I’m not sure that we always feel that way. But it is indeed a privilege to be able to give; a privilege to partner with God in all that God is doing – including what God is doing in faraway places.

Maybe in heaven one day we will meet someone who says, ‘You know that donation you made for the Methodist World Mission fund – it enabled us to buy a mosquito net to protect our child from malaria; or that donation enabled me to get a Bible in my own language – a gift that changed my life.

The grace of giving; the giving of grace.