

GIVING

2 Cor 8:1-9

Today we look at the third, and last, of the disciplines that have traditionally been emphasised in the Church during Lent – we've looked at prayer and fasting, today is about giving. With Good Friday just two weeks away, this of course is very relevant, as we think about all that Jesus gave for us and the world in His death on the cross. In the words we read, 'Rich as He was, Christ made Himself poor for our sake, in order to make us rich by means of His poverty'.

The subject of giving is also relevant for these days of crisis that we are living through. The events of these days have brought to the fore two very contrasting reactions in people. The one is the grabbing and grasping as some people have done, stock-piling supplies. But on the other side there are more and more stories coming to the fore of people giving generously of themselves in different ways.

Just as the war saw great acts of self-sacrifice, this too is the case in this world war that is raging at present. Thankfully, in this case, everyone is on the same side. It is my hope, as it is of many, that our world will come out on the other side of this dark tunnel more caring, more tolerant and more united.

When the subject of giving is mentioned, we tend to think of it in the narrow sense of the giving of our money. That is certainly an important aspect. It is also often a good indicator of our general level or generosity. But giving, in essence, is not so much about specific acts of giving, but rather about the inner attitude of our hearts. That's where it starts, or doesn't start.

We give, first and foremost, because we are made in the image of a God who is a giving, generous, gracious, God. From the beginning God has been giving - giving us a creation of such marvellous beauty and wonder; giving us life – not just physical but also spiritual life through Jesus. 'God so loved the world that He gave: He gave humanity this earth, and ultimately He gave His only Son so that we may have eternal life'. And we are created in the image of this giving God. That should be our default nature. John says in his letter, 'We love because God first loved us'. Its equally true to say, 'We give, because God first gave to us'. Winston Churchill once said, 'We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.'

Our first act of giving should be the giving of ourselves back to God. We heard in our reading, 'First they gave themselves to the Lord...'. I think that is happening afresh during this time. People are turning anew to God – maybe because of the need for God that many feel in these days, and maybe also because of having more time to think about spiritual matters. I saw this post on social media, 'No movies. No concerts. No sporting events. No restaurants. No social gatherings. Limited workload. Now that I've cleared your schedule, can we talk. Signed God. There's that saying, 'Man's extremity is God's opportunity'. Humanity's extreme need is God's opportunity – God's opportunity to take centre stage as He always should.

I've had this thought, that our experience at present is a bit like a death. I hope I'm not being over dramatic. But as in death we have let go of all we do and love, in a much smaller, but similar way, we are having to let go of many things. All we really have is our homes that we are being urged to stay in. In death, when we leave behind all the things of this world, what we hope for is a home; a home to which to go. Do we have the assurance of that home with the Father? Is our experience at present maybe nudging us to think more about that?

'First, they gave themselves to the Lord', says Paul, 'and then by God's grace they gave themselves to us as well'. They displayed their devotion to the Lord by giving themselves to Paul and his companions. They gave themselves – that included their money, but it was also more than that. They gave of themselves – their time, their energy, their prayers, their strength, their friendship, their love. These days are calling us, like them, to give ourselves anew to others. We are limited in what we can give, but there are still ways to reach out in love and care. We have seen that happening in many ways.

I think of the people on the front line in the NHS and other services. I think too of the thousands that have come forward to volunteer to assist in different ways – shopping for neighbours, delivering medicines,

phoning to check up on those who are very lonely or not well. Many people are praying more than ever, and that is a vital contribution we can make as people of faith.

The most extreme expression of generous, sacrificial, giving I have heard of, is that of the Catholic priest in Italy - Father Giuseppe Beradelli. He contracted the virus, so his parishioners bought him a respirator to use in hospital. But he donated it to a younger patient who was also battling the illness – someone he didn't even know. Giuseppe died as a result. We are very unlikely to be called on to make such a sacrifice, but we may need to be doing more than we are as the crisis worsens.

One of the most pressing social need at this time is the plight of those who have lost their means of income. The government has made some bold moves to try and alleviate the problem, but some self-employed people can't wait till June. Others may not qualify for assistance. Is it not maybe the time to be thinking about assistance that we can provide? Maybe there are those of us who can assist a needy person or family – if not with a gift, maybe with a loan? Is there something we can do as a Church by channelling contributions to people in need, or to organisations on the front line of relief efforts.

I think St Paul might agree. He speaks of the churches in Macedonia: 'They gave as much as they could and even more than they could. Of their own free will they begged and pleaded with us for the privilege of having a part in helping God's people.' Man's extremity is God's opportunity. It is also the Church's opportunity to display the generosity of our Lord. Reflecting afterwards on WW2 Churchill said, 'Never let a good crisis go to waste.'

In the Bible-in-a-year readings on Friday, when I was preparing this message, there was this verse Deuteronomy 15: 'If there are poor among you, do not be selfish or greedy towards them. But freely give to them, and freely lend them whatever they need.' Then in the NT lesson for the day in Lk 3 were the words of John the Baptist, 'If you have two shirts, share with the person who does not have one. If you have food, share that also.'

On the night before His death Jesus said to His disciples 'I am giving you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.'

I close with this paragraph I read in an online article from a South African journalist. 'We have the power to not let this pandemic define our worst selves, but rather to define our best selves. We have an opportunity in the shadow of the threat to transcend egocentricity and start to behave in a sociocentric manner – to care for those that cannot care for themselves and to demonstrate courage. Covid19 can be humanity's finest hour.'

How much more for us, as the representatives on earth, of the God who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son to save us'?

