

The Grace of Giving Nehemiah 7:5-73, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

A sermon preached by Rev Canon Alyson Lamb on 24 February 2019 in Mitford and Hebron

If you are a visitor this morning you may be wishing you'd come on a different day. You have probably concluded that today is about the church rattling the can. But you can relax because in fact we are doing something quite different, something that is at the heart of the Christian message. Love, of course, is the very heart of the Christian message, but loving and giving are inseparable.

You can give without loving, but you cannot love, truly love, without giving.

In the Bible, the word *believe* occurs 272 times, the word *pray* – 371 times, *love* – 741 times, but the word *give* – 2162 times. There it is, in St John's one-sentence summary of the Christian faith: *'For God so loved the world that he.... gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not die, but have eternal life'*.

[We can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving](#)

Believe it or not giving is a central theme in the book of Nehemiah too. Chapter 7 is a pivotal point in the book. At this stage in the story, Nehemiah's purpose - the vision God gave him at the outset - has been achieved. The broken-down walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt, the gates are back in place. Surely there's nothing left to say? - except that they had a big celebration and all lived happily ever after. That will happen, but not until chapter 12, because there is still much to be done if the restoration of Jerusalem is going to count for the Kingdom of God.

A city is more than walls and gates; a city is *people*. That is the revelation, the fresh vision that Nehemiah receives from God:¹ *'Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families.'*

Jerusalem is a ghost town, but it has potential. So Nehemiah sets about repopulating it. He finds the 'book of genealogy' [the long list of exotic names in vv7-65 are the faithful who'd returned from exile], and he calls them back inside the city. The community of faith needs to be reformed, the people need to be rebuilt spiritually, and in chapters 8-13 we will see how that happens.

But meanwhile, if we read chapter 7 closely, we find that the key to fulfilling the vision was the people's *giving*. For most of the families and individuals listed in this chapter the move into the city was probably the greatest act of sacrificial giving of their lives. When they returned from exile, most of them would have settled in small rural communities in the country around Jerusalem. Nehemiah was asking them to uproot themselves and live in a totally different environment. Most of them would be forsaking neighbours and friends of long standing. It was a big ask, but the people responded with courage and faith. They gave their time, their prayers, their service to the vision, and they gave their money too. By the amounts of gold, silver (and priestly robes!) listed the final section of the chapter, we know that the people gave very generously indeed.

Now I know that to some extent I'm preaching to the converted. There is a great deal of giving and generosity in this church. But even so, I think it's good to remind ourselves about the Christian attitude to giving, particularly to giving money, because it is so different to the world's attitude. The world's attitude is summed up in the old Russian proverb: *'What's mine is mine. What's yours is negotiable'*. But Christianity turns that completely upside down as St Paul wanted the church at Corinth to understand.

¹ Nehemiah 7:5

The apostle Paul was writing in the context of a collection being made in all the churches of Asia Minor for the impoverished mother-church in Jerusalem. Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians tell us pretty much all we need to know about the Christian attitude to giving; not just **Why we give**, but also **How to give**, and **How much to give**.

Why we give

Why do we take an offering each Sunday, why do we encourage regular giving? Is it because the church needs money, because there are running costs, and important projects and mission and ministry that all needs financing? That may be so, but it is not the bottom line of Christian giving.

Hear again how Paul starts his appeal to the Corinthians:² *'We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia.'*

Notice that Paul doesn't begin with the needs of the church in Jerusalem, or with what the Macedonian churches had done. He starts with what God had done, the grace God had given those churches.

Grace, generosity – the words occur five times in these verses, culminating in this beautiful verse:³

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

No one has ever given as much as God did, for you and for me. No-one has ever given a gift that cost so much. God's own son set aside all the riches of his life in the Godhead, and came, and identified with our human poverty of sin and brokenness, and died for us. Jesus died the terrible death of the Cross so that we could be rich in God, now and to eternity. That is *'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ'* which you know, we know. God so loved, that he gave. He gave to us - way beyond what we deserve.

In the same way, the motive for all Christian giving is grace - not obligation or duty. *'I am not commanding you'*⁴ Paul says to the Corinthians as he would want to say to us this morning.

Yes, God does *ask* us to give to him of our treasure⁵ because he knows us! He knows we are inclined to trust in our bank balance more than we trust him. But God does not force us to give, it is entirely up to us whether or not we choose to grow in what St Paul calls *'this grace of giving'*⁶. As Christians we are called to live our lives in the light of the Cross, and we need to see our money in that same light. Is that how we look at our bank statements, I wonder, as if printed on paper watermarked with the Cross?

Now there may be people here this morning for whom this is news. And perhaps you want to be sure that you are growing in this 'grace of giving'. Which brings us to the How of Christian giving.

How we give

People sometimes ask me, *How much should I give, how much is enough, how do I work it out?*

Tithing, giving a tenth of your income to God, is the Old Testament rule, and the principle of the tithe still stands. All Christians are called to set aside a generous proportion of our income regularly to give to God through his church. Practically speaking, a standing order is a great way to do this; it is definitely our preferred way of receiving regular giving since it is much better use of our volunteer treasurer's time than administering envelope-giving. But there is no rule about how to give, or about *how much* to give. Because it is not the amount of money that is important to God it is the amount of generosity. We know that from

² 2 Corinthians 8.1

³ 2 Cor 8.9

⁴ 2 Cor 8.8

⁵ Matthew 6.21

⁶ 2 Cor 8.5

Jesus' story of the widow's mite ⁷ - the two copper coins that she put into the Temple's treasury were worth more than all the gold and silver of the rich people, because for her it represented such generous gift – everything she had. The people of the Macedonian churches, too – St Paul tells us that they were extremely poor, but 'their *abundant joy and extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity*'.⁸

I heard Archbishop Sentamu tell a story to illustrate this point, about a rich Christian lady, who had a servant. *The servant gave nine-tenths of her meagre income to the service of God, and did it with great cheerfulness. The rich lady, yes, gave large amounts of money but it didn't cost her much, and there was no cheerfulness in her giving. Both died and went to heaven. St Peter welcomed them at the pearly gates and said, 'Ladies you are most welcome, I'll show you to your quarters'. And he took first of all the servant to the most luxurious gold-paved part of the city, to a huge mansion and said to her, Madam, this is yours. And the servant couldn't believe it. The rich lady thought to herself, 'Wow if this is what my servant gets, mine must be 100 times bigger!' St Peter said to the rich lady, 'Madam, follow me' and they went to the outskirts of the city and he showed her a tiny little hut. 'Madam, these are your quarters'. 'No, no, no,' the rich lady protested, St Peter I think you've got it wrong. This belongs to my servant and the big mansion in the city centre paved with gold is mine. 'No' St Peter replied, 'I haven't got it wrong Madam. We build up here with what we receive from below. And all we received up here from you could only build you this hut. The servant may have been poor, but everything she could give she gave to the service of God and her fellow men and women, and it built her that big mansion at the centre of the city.'*

Of course this is not a literal picture of what will happen when heaven comes to earth ⁹, but it illustrates the truth that God does not meet his needs through wealth, but through generosity. God is not looking for big-money people, he is looking for people who are willing to give generously, sacrificially, so that it hurts a bit. Because that is generous giving according to God's pattern, the pattern of the Cross.

It is the amount of generosity that is important to God

So don't worry if you're not rich! No matter how much or how little you have, each person here has an enormous potential to do good.

Because, like Nehemiah and the people of God, we too have a vision. It is a vision for people, for the thousands of men, women and children around us who don't yet know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a vision not just to survive as a church but to grow, in numbers and in Christ-likeness. It is a vision to leave a strong legacy for those who come after us. We have such a rich inheritance here, we have been blessed by the faith and sacrifices of those who've gone before us, and we want to pass on the blessing to those who will come after us. It is a big ask, a big vision and it will take courage and faith to fulfil it. We will likely need more resources as the years go on, and our costs will likely grow year by year.

But God tells us that all we have to do is give generously and he will meet all our needs and more. Not only the church's needs, but your needs. 'Test me in this, God says in Malachi, *and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it*'¹⁰.

I know that is the experience of some of you here, and it has been my own experience too.

Long ago someone taught me about the grace of giving and the spiritual value of tithing. By God's grace I've managed to keep up that discipline over the years and increase the proportion I give, although I did struggle for a year or so in theological college. But it was possible and God is so faithful! I have never lacked for what

⁷ Mark 12.41-44

⁸ 2 Corinthians 8.2

⁹ see Revelation 21, 22

¹⁰ Malachi 3.10

I have needed. I know from my personal experience what the Bible tells us: that God is no-one's debtor¹¹. We cannot outgive God.

I do hope you realise that I am not telling you this about myself to boast, but just to let you into a secret in case you don't already know it: giving money sacrificially, so that it 'hurts a bit' is liberating. It is so exciting to see God honour his word and pour out his blessing! Can your money bring peace and contentment? The Bible's answer is *Yes - if you give it away!*

Sacrificial giving changes the world

But sacrificial giving brings so much more than individual benefit. Today, when people who follow Jesus Christ are ready to put their financial resources at his disposal the world benefits, not just from the actual money and what it can provide but because every time we give ourselves to this Jesus-pattern of Cross-shaped sacrifice, the power of the gospel is let loose again in the world and the impact of that is beyond calculation.

In a few minutes a Churchwarden will be presenting us with information on the nuts and bolts of our financial situation, and how we believe God is calling us to respond. There are some printed materials for you to take away. May I encourage you to read them closely and pray over the information. It is so important for us to be praying about our response, as individuals and as a Church. But finally, may I say this: if what I have been saying does not make sense to you, please don't give. Obviously I can't tell you what to do, but I do want to release you from any sense of pressure or obligation. If God's grace to you in Jesus Christ does not make sense to you then please don't give. Because God does not want your money, he does not need your money - he wants to give you more of Jesus.

END

¹¹ Romans 11.35