

We are having such an exciting time in the churches at the moment. Back in the summer we had a fantastic day away with all the PCCs, where we worked together towards a vision that would inspire us and sustain us in the years to come. We did some great work, and we took it away, and thought about it some more, some of you came and helped us at a launch evening we did back in the autumn, we thought about it some more at the first lot of PCCs we did after that, and now we have arrived at C, D and E, Creating Community, Deepening Discipleship, and Encouraging Evangelism.

And it has been just a thrill for me to work with people from across the PCCs on each of these strands of our vision, and to look together at how we can grow in each of these three areas. And I am excited that already we are making progress – last week someone sent me a great idea for something new we could do in one of the churches that came from their group. I've got a little slip of paper for you to fill in that comes from the Discipleship group meeting, where we decided to ask everyone from around the churches to let us know how they felt things were going with their own discipleship – their prayer life and engagement with the Scriptures especially – so that we can help you with that at the beginning of next year.

There's going to be stuff to do on the community front too, and with encouraging evangelism – all rattling along at the beginning of next year. We are longing to see some new people find faith in Jesus, and come into the churches, and so we are fasting and praying ahead of all our visitors who will come this Christmas, and looking on to the New Year, to Alpha in January, and beyond. And as I do that, I am captivated by this sense I have of God at work, and on the move, and I am looking for signs of the Spirit's working, and encouraging people to join in.

There are so many ways we can all join in with the things that God is doing. We can all pray, and we can all tell the stories of the good things that are happening, and we can all give.

When you look at the bible, there is loads about money. More about money, in fact, than lots of other things that we talk about a lot more. Jesus talks about it repeatedly. And as the bible talks repeatedly about money, so a few principles appear repeatedly which we ought to dwell on for a moment, and look for them in our readings and elsewhere.

First of all, biblical giving is to be planned, and regular. In 1 Corinthians 16 Paul encourages the churches: “Now about the collection for the Lord’s people: do what I told the Galatian churches to do. ²On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.”

Now some of you will have noticed that this is not what we are doing today. I can’t pretend that what we are talking about today is *regular* giving. What we are doing today is a specific appeal for a specific reason – we want to invest in the future of our ministry here by paying our full parish share, and build up our reserves so that we have just a little breathing space going into next year. It will make all the difference to us.

So it is not regular, planned giving, but regular planned giving is really important to us, and lots of you do that very much already, I know, but there are perhaps others of you who might like to start thinking about doing that, and invest in the church you benefit from now, and that others will benefit from in the future. For as long as we have been married Cathryn and I have tried to give in the way Paul suggests – he says set something aside at the beginning of each week – we do it at the beginning of every month when the money comes in, so that when we pay our gas and electric we give to the churches here at the same time, so that we know how we’re fixed.

Paul’s point is that if everyone gives this way, then he won’t have to turn up and take a special collection, but look – here I am today, asking for a special collection. It is tempting – I think accurate – to conclude that if we were all giving in this way, collections like this might not have to happen. Some time next year we will talk a lot more about regular giving, across the group, but for now, a little more on some principles which apply to special offerings as well.

First, they are to be proportional. The first of 2 stories for today, both of which I have probably told some or all of you before...

There was a Communist farmer who was called before the party to give an account of himself. “Tell us, Comrade”, they asked him. “What would you do if you had two barns?”

“If I had 2 barns”, he replied, “I would give one to the party, and keep one for myself and my family.”

“And if you had 2 tractors?”

“Again, I would keep one for the party, and one for myself and my family.”

“And if you had 2 chickens?”

“Oh, I would keep both of them,” he said.

“But why is that?” they asked angrily. “You gave such good answers to our first 2 questions? Why not the chickens?”

“The thing is, you see”, he replied, “I’ve *got* 2 chickens.”

God is interested in what we *have*, not what we don’t.

A man was taking a flight and arrived at the airport with time to spare, so he went to get a coffee. He was hungry, so he bought a bag of little doughnuts too. It was crowded, so he asked a man at a table on his own if he might sit opposite him: the man smiled, and beckoned to him to take a seat.

The first man began to drink coffee, and reached over into the bag and took out a doughnut. The man opposite smiled, reached out and took one for himself. Horrified, the first man took a second, and a third. Each time the same thing happened: the other man just took one as well. Finally there was one left. Still smiling broadly, the second man reached out and went to put the final doughnut in his mouth. Thinking twice, he broke it in two, and offered half to the first man, popped the second half in his mouth, gathered his things, and walked off.

Horrified, flabbergasted, the first man sat there a little while in shock, before resolving to run after the first man and have it out with him. He jumped from his seat, and reached down to grab his had luggage, his laptop... and his bag of doughnuts.

God is interested in what we *have*, not what we *don't*. He is interested in what we *have*, because it is *his*. Just now at Caistor I was thinking about Christ the King Sunday, and the way it says in Colossians 1 that all things have been created by Jesus, and for Jesus. There is nothing in the world, in that respect, that is not his. And this informs our generosity. It is realising this that makes the widow, poor as she is, offer up so much out of her poverty while the comparatively wealthy withheld what God had given them. It is realising that salvation has come into his house that makes Zacchaeus give away half of all he has. In the chapter immediately before that in Luke's gospel, Jesus asked not half, but everything, of the rich young man. In 2 Corinthians 8 the people are charged by Paul to give as much as they are able. Not to put themselves in hardship, to bankrupt themselves, but to be honest before God, and to give as much as they are able.

I appreciate that many of our most generous members are not perhaps our wealthiest, and so I would reassure – and encourage – you especially to only give what you are able. None of these examples names a specific sum which is expected of someone, and with a freewill offering I can't do that, but the Scriptures encourage me to ask you to give what you are able to.

But we plan to give, we give in proportion, and we give with sacrificial generosity, because it is all God's, and we do not withhold from him that little portion of all that he has given us. Paul, again, calls the Corinthians to great generosity. Sacrificial generosity. You are good at so much, he says, and that is just so obvious in our churches here, but excel at this, he says. Be brilliant at generosity. I approach the challenging task of raising £4000 or so in these couple of weeks with some optimism, you know, because I think that in some of us this brilliant generosity is at work and evident, and in others of us it is a tremendous gift that God wants to use this opportunity to release and unlock. Do it because those who sow generously reap generously. Do it because in sustaining our churches and our ministry here, God will repay our generosity in doing more than all we can ask our imagine.

Finally, Paul says, do it cheerfully. I don't want to lead a load of grumpy givers. I am preaching to myself really, because I don't want to be one. If we get like that, we're going to have a really rubbish time! So please don't give to this feeling that you must, or grumpy because you are having to give even more because someone else isn't giving enough, or whatever it might be. Do

it cheerfully. Do it with excitement at the wonderful growth, at the wonderful future, that God is leading us into.

This week, Year 2 from Stoke school, 28 of them, 6 and 7 years old, came in here. Some interesting things happened. First of all, when they came in, one of them looked around and just went, 'Wow!' I asked him if he'd been in here before, and he said no. I don't want anyone to get to 6 in this village – let alone 66 - without connecting with the church in a more meaningful way than that.

Second, we had a walk around the outside of the building and I showed them some stuff, and then we got back round to the door and I asked if there were any questions about the building. Another boy, again I think never been here before, asked me 'How does God have the power to heal anyone who is ill?' Then he said 'How did God not get born? How has he always been there?'

Third, yesterday I received a sheaf of 28 thank you letters. They are amazing. They say a lot about how they liked having a drink and biscuit, and baptising a dolly in the font, and thank you for putting the heating on. But they also say things like, 'I enjoyed holding the candle and speaking to God'; 'I liked speaking to God'; 'It made me feel peaceful'; 'I enjoyed praying with a candle'; 'I felt peaceful'; 'I will come back'.

28 lovely reasons to be cheerful – as well as generous, intentional, and proportional. Shall we pray...?