

My God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Stewardship Sunday, 2nd Sunday in Lent 9 March 2020

Refs: Deuteronomy 26 v1-3, 10-11; Philippians 4 v10-20; John 6 v 5-13

You don't need me to tell you that we are in times of change at St Peter's. In a few months' time, the parish will be in vacancy, and already plans to recruit a new Vicar have started. We are in a very good position as a church to face the vacancy, with a strong clergy team, and a strong team of laypeople as well.

At this stage, there are two bits of advice I would give:

- keep trusting in God. Pray for God to lead the church through the vacancy and pray for God's choice for a new Vicar here.
- It's important for the whole congregation to work and to pull together. Don't just leave it all to a few. This could be a time to move from being a church member or a church attender to being a pillar of the church, standing up with all the other pillars of the church, together holding the church up and keeping it strong, ready to go forward into a new future. And that includes our finances and our giving.

So in this context, in the first part of my sermon today I am going to be very practical, talking about our finances as a church, and the challenges before us. In the second part of my sermon, I want to turn to our readings and ask what they tell us about Christian giving. Let's start with the context.

Two years ago, we held a Stewardship Giving Campaign. At the time, St Peter's was in considerable financial deficit. Thanks to your wonderful support as a congregation, the deficit was completely wiped out, and we were able to break even. So what's happened since then? As usual, the cost of living has risen. Also rising is our Parish Share – the contribution we have to pay to the diocese every year towards clergys' salaries and pensions, expensive but essential training of new clergy. Then the mundane bits – the statutory administrative and legal oversight of the diocese – essential costs of running the church or any charity. Last year we were fortunate. The deanery allowed us to freeze our parish share. This year they are asking for a modest increase of just under £500, but next year we will need to take on a full rise of about 3%.

Unfortunately, our giving at St Peter's has not increased since 2018. It has declined by about £4,000 a year. By careful budgeting we have continued to break even so far, but we need to increase our annual giving by at least £4,000 to restore that gap and to meet the normal cost of living rises.

We have relied on rental income from the parish rooms to help us break even. The closure of the Playgroup last summer was not only sad for us and for the community, but also resulted in a loss of rental income of at least £5,000 a year.

On top of that there are several significant roles in the church which are at present staffed on a volunteer basis. We're very much aware that when these current volunteers retire or move on, these roles will almost certainly need to be salaried. We estimate that we need to increase our income by about £5,000 to cover this. If we haven't built up our income ready for this, then obviously we are going to be in difficulty!

Overall, that means that we are looking to increase our giving by at least £14,000 a year. That's challenging, but not impossible. We are blessed with about 120 regular givers. An average increase in giving of £10 a month (or £8 if eligible for Gift Aid) would achieve this target in full.

Obviously, we're not expecting everybody to do that. We are all in different places financially. For example, when I retire, Jane and I will have a significant reduction in our income, so our giving in the next parish will have to be lower than it has been here. Everyone of us is in a different situation. Some of us may have rising incomes and may be able to do more.

What we are asking is for all of us to review our giving. Some of us are already doing that. 44 of our givers who joined the Parish Giving scheme in 2018 also ticked the inflation box whereby the Parish Giving scheme each year suggests a rise in giving in line with the RPI. If you choose to agree to this, your giving that year will rise in line with inflation. To those who have done that, we just want to say thank you.

As for the rest of us, we would encourage you to join the Parish Giving scheme if you're not signed up, and to join the Stewardship scheme if you're not yet part of it. To all of us, we'd simply invite you to review your giving in the light of our changing needs at St Peter's.

There is a letter in church today explaining all of this. Please take your personal letter, read it and pray for God's guidance how to respond to it. Of course your response will depend on your own financial situation, which will be different for each of us.

I think that's enough of numbers and figures! Let's turn now to our readings and see what they tell us of some of the principles of Christian giving.

I want to start with Deuteronomy, and this rather beautiful reading which is often used at Harvest Festivals. I love the imagery of bringing the basket filled with the first fruits of your harvest. There are two principles here. The first is that our giving is a response to God's goodness to us. It's about recognising all that God has given to us, and wanting to give something back. The second is that we give the first fruits to God, not the bit left over at the end! We don't buy everything we need first, and then see if we've got anything left over for God. No – we give to God first, in proportion to our income, and then we spend the rest on our own needs. That's a good principle.

I love the second reading we had today from St Paul's letter to the Philippians thanking them for their generosity. So often St Paul found it was the poorest churches that gave the most. And I love the sense you have in this passage that the Philippians were not giving because they felt they should – not giving because of some sense of compulsion or guilt – but giving as their grateful response to God's generous love for them. And that's what Christian giving is all about. It's not about any sense of guilt or compulsion, it's about appreciating the depth of God's love for us and wanting to give back what we can.

Of course, one of the reasons why we hesitate is because we get anxious about money. That's not new. Remember Jesus going on about not being anxious about money? It was obviously as big an issue in his day as it is for us.

I think this reading addresses the issue in a way that's helpful and realistic. St Paul says:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

There is a bracing realism here. This is certainly not some prosperity gospel! To me it makes sense. Sometimes God provides for our needs by showing us that we didn't need everything we thought we did. Many times I have found both in church and in our family life, that we don't have the money for everything we would like, but in the end we always seem to have enough for what we need – sometimes at the last minute!

It's in this context that St Paul can say with confidence: *"And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."*

It's this confidence, this trust in God, that can release us from our anxiety about money. And this in turn makes us able to give willingly and cheerfully, not grudgingly and fearfully.

Finally, our gospel story about the boy with five loaves and two fishes. I used to tell this story in school assemblies as the story of the boy and his packed lunch, though I suspect it was rather more than his packed lunch. It was probably his food for the next two or three days! When I told the story of the boy realising he was the only one there with any food I imagined how he must have been tempted to hide it and creep away quietly without being noticed. But he doesn't, he comes forward and offers it to Jesus.

I've often heard people talk about how in this story Jesus takes something very small and turns it into something huge. And that's right. But don't make any mistake – for the boy it wasn't something small. Those five loaves and two fish were all he had. And he was probably hungry but he gives it all to Jesus. That is not just generous – that is sacrificial. Of course, it all works out well – and he probably goes home with a bigger basket of food than he came with! But it illustrates something important, about each of us giving what we can. Because giving in the church is not about a few people giving a lot – but about a lot of us giving what we can.

Thank you for listening. Do take a letter home and read it carefully. And as we each decide what we want to give, in response to God's great love for us, each of us giving like that boy in our gospel story, remember that God calls us to be generous only because God himself is generous, and he wants us to learn to be more like him.