

## GENEROSITY WEEK

I could have changed today's Readings for our thinking today about the Church of England's latest initiative: 'Generosity Week.' But I decided against this, because both our readings today speak of learning to live sacrificially and for our shared Christian calling and witness to be truly 'counter-cultural': to be surprised by God searching us out, and saying something radically different.

St Paul's very clear message to the faithful community of Christians in Philippi is summarised at the end of our reading: "And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well." In other words, we are not being called into a seminar about communal Christian living and then walking away. No, St Paul is urging us to strive, "side by side" for the sake of the gospel and that is always going to be challenging – how we support one another generously as well as how we encourage new believers, new disciples that the parable of the widow's mite changes the way we see what God demands of us, lovingly and willingly.

Which is why our Gospel parable today again changes our outlook and perhaps makes us feel uncomfortable at first. In the very long queue last week outside the surgery down Little St John's Street, waiting for my flu jab, the **last** were definitely not **first** to be seen. (I did overhear a lot of conversations about going off to Turkey for three weeks or, coming back from a cruise and a bit of local gossip about the shops or the

weather, so I was quite entertained!). But the smart folk like Barbara and Liz (mentioning no names) ...decided not to queue, but to nip back just before the surgery closed...why didn't I think of that?!

Seriously though, our contemporary society is sounding very much like those labourers in the vineyard who are arguing amongst themselves either about who is most important (and therefore valuable) or, who really should be sent back to the job centre! There's a pecking order, isn't there, which is defined by the kind of work we do whether we work long and hard or not? That's why, I suggest, Matthew is being counter-cultural here. Instead of the "Me, me, me" generation he is really challenging us to reverse this mind-set and start with the premise that it is God who is the generous giver, like the landowner in today's parable. God is the one who welcomes rich and poor alike into his kingdom. And in my Matthew Commentary by Eduard Schweizer he adds this:

"In Jesus' mouth the parable is a warning against "grumbling", the kind of attitude that exclaims indignantly over tax collectors and prostitutes, "You have made them equal to *us*?" ...Thus Jesus' story came to speak with an always pertinent voice; that it still does so is the sign of a good parable."

I agree with that. In thinking and thanking God today for all his generous gifts of faith and love in us, not least the gift of life itself, we do well to recall that opening prayer by St Ignatius of Loyola which my 'training' Vicar learnt by heart

and seemed to use at every PCC meeting, as well as many others. 'To give and not to count the cost, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for reward' – these are the distinctive Christian qualities of Christ-filled lives, and the very making of generous Christian communities. Of course, sacrifice lies at the heart of this belonging and believing and equality, not sanctimony.

Thank you so much to all of you who contribute and give weekly or monthly in our Benefice, especially those of you who have moved over to the national Parish Giving Scheme. I realise that having a 'hand collection' at the offertory is now looking as outdated as having a local bank in the high street! There are so many other, quicker and easier ways to commit your giving to our Parish which also include gift-aid; if in any doubt, please do take a closer look at all the available guides and resources on our Diocesan website. And please do think long and hard if the coming vacancy for a new PCC Treasurer may be your chance to shine, and help us all with the shared responsibility of generous giving to a generous God.

**And a final thought. It isn't just the maintenance and upkeep of a beautiful building which matters but also funding additional and different ministries – whether that's music, youth work, community work, different chaplaincies, you name it. At next week's Harvest we will hear how Major Alan Hill is at the heart of our local Foodbank in this 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Salvation Army's dedication to the poorest and most vulnerable of our community here. It is another chance to say a big thank you to him and, of course, to our bountiful, big-hearted Creator, who is and always will be:**

**Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.**