**Giving 2 Sunday 25th September 2016**

Deuteronomy 26. 1 – 11
2 Corinthians 9. 6 – 15

Prayer

Today, as promised, is my second set of reflections on giving. In the first sermon I spoke about the profligate generosity of God and how, faced with such generosity combined with the command to go and make disciples of all people baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that Jesus taught, we cannot help but make a response and encourage others by speaking to them of the wonderful message of the profligacy of God. This is the business of the church, the business of the community of all the baptised. As I commented before, the church is the powerhouse of mission, the place where people come to worship, to be nourished and then to go out into the market places of the world and to do this, to be that powerhouse the church needs resources. The church is a springboard for the life of discipleship in which we take seriously the need to provide resources, financial as well as in other ways. So today I want to look at that resourcing and suggest ways in which we might approach it.

At our blue sky thinking morning – and I have to say publicly how thrilled I was that so very many of you came to that - you identified three words that you wanted to describe this church in five years’ time: you wanted it to be a place of welcome in all its guises, you wanted it to be a place of spirituality and you wanted it to be a place that is forward thinking. Giving thought to the mission and ministry of the church and the resources required is an important part of realising that vision. One of the interesting facts that it is perhaps worth pondering is that the Bible says far more about money than it does about sexuality or some of the other issues that appear to preoccupy the church and grab the headlines. So first some reflections arising from our readings. That beautiful passage from Deuteronomy reminds us that our response to God is about the first fruits and not about what is left over at the end. There is nothing ad hoc about it rather it is part of the planning. In the Old Testament the measure of giving was the tithe, 10% which was given to maintain the Temple, its worship and those who served there as well as being enjoined to be generous to the poor and needy. There are some lovely instructions for example which remind farmers not to glean right to the edge of their fields but rather to leave this to the poor and the widows. Now the tithe is scarcely mentioned in the New Testament, but if we see the people of the old Testament responding in this way to what God has given them how much more should we, who have received the extraordinary gift of God in Christ, respond. In the passage we heard from 2 Corinthians Paul says “God loves a cheerful giver”, in other words someone who has been touched by the love of God and in response to that love delights to give to God to support the work of his church and his mission here on earth.

I hasten to add that giving is not about making oneself poor. It is not about giving what we do not have or of ignoring the joyful responsibilities we have to our families and to society. The proportion of our income that we give needs to be in proportion to our wealth. For someone on the poverty line or below to give a tenth would be deeply sacrificial, but to someone who is a millionaire it would go unnoticed. But as our passage from 2 Corinthians emphasises the important thing is that it is planned, thought about, prayed about – giving is a spiritual issue - and therefore joyful.

I said earlier that the church was the powerhouse of mission and therefore needs resources. People often say, but doesn’t the church have huge amounts of inherited wealth? It is true that in the past the church was largely funded by the Church Commissioners, using Queen Anne’s bounty. In other words, the church, up to the 1980s lived off the generosity of the past. But we are the church of today. The money from the Church Commissioners no longer funds the ministry of the local church. The Parish Support Fund, the money which parishes give to the diocese is used to pay for the mission and ministry of the church in the diocese. It pays for vicars, for housing, for training, for pensions and so on. But of course the work of the church is not just what vicars do on a Sunday, yes, we do make worship happen, we baptize, we bring families together for marriage, we provide regular worship in schools, hospitals, residential homes and we enable people to make steps along their journey of faith, we walk with families in funerals when they say goodbye to their loved ones. Alongside that the church provides more youth workers than the government, we are committed to pastoral care in every community and the church provides the biggest network of volunteers in the country. We also have beautiful churches like this one which are at the heart of communities, spaces for quiet prayer and our buildings are often the focus for community events as well as being centres of tourist attraction in many cases. It is for these many things that the money given in the parish support fund is used. But of course, as powerhouses of mission and ministry the local church also has a duty to and a joy in looking outwards to the needs of others both in our own communities and throughout the world. The money that is given is not only used for the Parish Support Fund and the upkeep of our church but also for new initiatives to reach out into our communities with the love of Christ and to respond to the needs of the world. At our recent PCC meeting we were discussing our approach here to charitable giving – something that came up in the feedback from our morning together – and from those present there was unanimous support for adopting a system whereby a proportion of our income is given to charitable causes. The focus of the church must be outwards as well as drawing strength from its internal life. The church is called to model the giving that it teaches its disciples to practise – planned, prayerful, proportionate, joyful and generous.

So why am I talking about this? We had a good morning together. The ideas flowed fast and free and it was really inspiring writing them up. Those ideas are not going to be lost. The PCC and the Mission Action Planning Team and the other committees of the church are committed to ensuring that a strategic five-year plan is not just thought about but put into action. I don’t think it would be beyond my remit to say that along with a number of things that can be done relatively easily, we are planning to redevelop our hall. I know that there are already some funds put aside to contribute to this and we need to honour those who gave generously in the past by ensuring that this really does come to fruition. Whatever we do, will require funds. Whatever we do will be surrounded by prayer and be assured that whatever we do, will be done to further the mission and ministry of the church in this place. So I am asking you to reconsider your giving. Many of you already give by standing order. It helps with budgeting. If you don’t then you might consider doing so. Even if you do, it is very easy to heave a sigh of relief and then forget to review that giving annually. I am asking you to consider whether your giving is planned, and proportionate. This is a generous church and the church is grateful for all that is already given and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. This is not the vicar getting at you but simply raising the profile of this particular aspect of our spiritual life. It is our response to the profligate generosity of God. There is a place for going away and spending time in prayer as we reflect on the place of money in our lives and consider whether our giving is appropriate. I urge us to look at our giving in a proportionate way. What percentage of our income should we give and what percentage should we give to the church and what percentage to other charitable causes? I hasten to add, that looking at our giving in this way means that should our circumstances change then that proportion will also change either up or down, and that is important too. And if you are a tax payer, then gift aiding whatever you give makes a significant difference.

Above all, let us all remember the generosity of the God who gave himself for us and let us recover and experience to the full, the sheer joy of giving that enables us to spread the compassionate love of God to our community and to our world.