

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Harvest Festival 27th September 2020, Linton 8 am

God loves a cheerful giver

2 Corinthians 9.6-15

Luke 12.13-21

Were they having 2nd thoughts – the Christians at Corinth, I mean? A year or more before Paul wrote them the letter, we heard this morning, they'd promised to give generously to the collection he'd set up for aid to the Church in Jerusalem. They'd been so enthusiastic, apparently, that Paul had been able to use them as an example - a lever even – to get other churches which he'd founded to follow suit. 'I boasted about you to the people in Macedonia', he said, 'saying that you'd been ready since last year to make the donation – and that got them stirred up too.' (see 9.1,2). Paul wasn't above playing off one community against another in a kind of competition, to get them to do what he thought was right!

But now it seems, from the passage we heard today, that the Corinthians needed a bit of a reminder about what they'd committed to, a bit of arm-twisting to keep them generous. 'The point is this', we heard, 'the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who

sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.' (v.8). What had Paul been hearing from the messengers who came to him from Corinth?

Or was it that he himself was just losing a bit of confidence that they'd come good – perhaps without any reason to do so. He'd asked a lot of them; maybe he was being 'of little faith' when he looked back at their enthusiasm.

But no matter: whatever the reason that he wrote to them now about giving, that motive elicited some wonderful writing and a message which is still apposite down the ages. Who can forget the wonderful slogan, *God loves a cheerful giver*' (v.7b)? He says plenty more about it both in this letter, and in other ones, but those 5 words just hit the nail on the head. Giving should be – and can be – a joy. Generosity is itself a blessing both to giver and receiver. Embrace it! It's part of our diocesan mission statement, of course, printed on virtually everything the diocese produces, and incorporated into all the diocesan liturgies, such as ordination and confirmation: '*We pray to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ.*' The bishops must dream those words at night: '*generous and visible, generous and visible...*' They're certainly worth dwelling on.

Of course, you might get a bit worried by what St Paul said: '*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.*' (v.10a). What kind of promise is that? Was

Paul one of those Prosperity Gospellers, who say 'give generously, invest with the Lord... and then just see how rich you get.' It's a pretty rash kind of religion, isn't it?

Well, I think Paul was indeed saying that generosity would be rewarded, and that he included tangible returns in what was promised; but then, so did Jesus: *'Seek first God's kingdom, and his righteousness, and the rest will be added to you as well'* (Matt 6.33). I think that Paul, like his Master, believed that a risk for others, taken in faith, would be noticed by God, who wouldn't let the risk-taker fail through his generosity. But what Paul – and Jesus – promised was not that generosity exercised in faith would lead to boundless wealth in material terms – but that God would make sure that the faithful and generous disciple would have *enough*. And 'enough', we know, is often a lot less than what we might materially desire. As Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi, *'I have learned to be content with whatever I have'* (Phil 4.12), whether that is little or plenty, being well-fed or going hungry. Generosity, then, may mean that we sometimes have to 'go without' what we might otherwise have had, but combined with cheerfulness, and contentment, it leads to enrichment in myriad other ways, particularly in relationships. Paul describes to the Corinthians how their generosity would make its recipients overflow with thankfulness to God, while they *'longed for'* the givers, and prayed for them (v.14) – in other words, givers and receivers would all be knit

together in a much closer bond, both utterly human and utterly spiritual.

When we're generous, do we feel that? Do we enjoy the fact that Christian Aid and other organisations sometimes relay messages back to us from the people on the other end of our giving, saying are really thankful, and are praying for us? A year or two back, when Christian Aid Week's focus was on Haiti, you may remember seeing a little film which ended, movingly, with the Haitian woman it featured closing her eyes and praying fervently in Creole for Christian Aid's supporters here. Perhaps we should value that sense of fellowship with our brothers and sisters a bit more. We could all do with people to pray for us!

Meanness, on the other hand, drives wedges between people. Jesus' parable in the Gospel reading was sparked off by a sense that one person was being mean, and the other resentful- and in the same family. It's such a familiar story, isn't it? A dispute over family property – which is a reason why we should all make sure we've left clear wills behind us to scotch the possibility of such disputes before they arise. The last thing you want in a family is one person saying 'he cheated me': but, on the other hand, it's wonderful in a family when there is a clear will, but a variation is made because one party says 'I don't need the money (or the property); my brother or my sister's need is greater than mine, so let them have it.' That kind of generosity, when it's thoughtful and

well-meant, can be really binding in a family, because it shows such consideration. And thank God, such things do happen, as well as the depressingly regular family quarrels over money we've all heard about.

When Jesus told his parable about the rich man and his barns, obviously the man who felt diddled was there, standing by to hear it; it was a parable against him we must suppose, because of his possessive jealousy. But also, a parable against the one who wouldn't share – the other brother; and we don't know whether he was there to hear it, or not. But they'd both got their priorities wrong – they weren't *'rich towards God'* as so many of us aren't. Possessions mattered more to them than relationships.

But, before I end with that statement, which threatens to be a bit of a cliché, I'd just like to pose a question which takes us beyond relationships with 'our nearest and dearest':

How would it be if we took rather more seriously the language we use about 'our brothers and sisters throughout the world', 'our brothers and sisters in Christ' – or even, the whole human race as 'children of the same heavenly Father?' If we would want, above all things, to avoid family disputes about material things wrecking relationships between those who are siblings through physical kinship, are we disturbed enough about the reasons so many of those other 'brothers and sisters' in the wider senses might justifiably have for

making the cry, *'tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me'* (Luke 12.13). If some of them don't make that implicit accusation against us, but instead pray for us with generosity and love, it's not because they have no reason to complain, but because they are incredibly gracious. God has truly touched them. We always need to have in our minds the questions, then - where are we, where is our nation and our culture, on the other side of that equation? Where do we stand in the scale of 'riches towards God'?

But let's return to the positive note with which we began, quoting again to ourselves Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: *'God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work...'* (9.7b,8) And let's end with the very basic prayer which we sometimes forget, but which could rightly be the prayer of our heart every day: *'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!...'* (9.15) or, as the Prayer Book General Thanksgiving has it, *'we...do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for thine inestimable goodness...'*