

1 Corinthians 16: 1-4; Mark 10: 17-27

Over the last couple of weeks you've been hearing a lot about Stewardship, and I am sure that you have got the message that Stewardship involves lots of other things apart from money.

Christian Stewardship is concerned with all the gifts of God and the way we use them. It is our response to God's love and God's commitment to the world and its people - a fundamental part of Christian Discipleship.

Unfortunately, the word '**stewardship**' has somehow come to be linked with the word '**fundraising**', often related to some urgent fabric problem, or specific building project, or some funding crisis, *but they are not the same*.

Christian Stewardship is concerned with the way we use our talents – both in the sense of money *and also* in the sense of our abilities and attributes. Stewardship campaigns tend to focus on time and talents.

Wealth and poverty is a major theme throughout Scripture. Jesus talked more about wealth and poverty than any other subject, but we don't hear many sermons focussed on money and giving. It is a potentially prickly subject and many preachers tend to shy away from it.

Yet we have to talk about money.

Common sense tells us that we need to contribute generously to the work of the church, locally, nationally and internationally. Bills have to be paid. Inflation raises prices for everything, and we know that the costs of the work of the church both at home and abroad escalate year by year.

If we want a church, and the work that it does in our name, then we have to pay for it, just as we have to pay for our sports and leisure facilities and the costs of running a car.

But these are practical issues, business matters, not spiritual matters, and maybe we hesitate to give them their proper emphasis.

We do give to the Church. Why?

1. We give in thanksgiving.

We give money, not because we can, or because we feel we must, but simply as a way of saying thank you to God.

The Collection, the Offering, gift, or whatever you call it, is fundamental to our worship. In the Old Testament, no-one ever came before God without some kind of offering as an expression of gratitude for all that God had done.

Deut. 16 tells us:

"Celebrate the Festival of Weeks to the Lord your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the Lord your God has given you". (NIV)

And the reason?

"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt."

For us, another reason is that, when we joined the Church, we promised to do it.

We should think of the giving of our money as just as important a part of our spiritual life as the time we spend in prayer and Bible study.

We give out of love and thankfulness as a way of saying thank you to God for what he has done for us in Christ. Remember the well-loved hymn by Isaac Watts:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Do we really give out of gratitude?

2. We give of our money as part of our life and witness to the world.

Immediately before the passage Peter read, Paul has been writing about the Resurrection of the Body and the life of the world to come, concluding with the wonderful words:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'
'Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?' (NIV)

Then he brings us back to earth with a bump: ***“Now about the collection...”***

These words remind me that when I was a peedie boy getting ready for Sunday School, my mother would always ask me, “Have you got your threepenny bit?” That dates me a bit. My collection – one eightieth of a pound - about 1¼ pennies in today’s money.

From high-flown theology to the practicalities of everyday life and church administration. Paul sees them as part of the same package: we have to put our faith into practice in our everyday life.

Some people think the money we receive should be kept entirely for our own needs. They often quote the saying, *“Charity begins at home”* in the mistaken idea that it comes from the Bible, and they usually seem to be implying that charity should end at home too.

That’s not what the Bible teaches!

There are plenty of examples of giving by people in abject poverty: the Widow’s Mite; the widow who fed Elijah in Zarephath.

At the time when that saying originated, the word *charity* meant *Christian love*, in the sense of faith, hope and love, rather than financial assistance. Charity – Christian love – *does* begin at home – but it must spread outwards.

In 2 Cor. Ch. 8 Paul tells us that the Macedonians gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability, to help destitute Christians whom they didn’t know personally. They gave of their own free will, and out of their poverty, because of their commitment to Christ.

John Bunyan said:
“You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.”

The Old Testament prophets repeatedly denounced the gap between promises and practice which often left the poor at a disadvantage.

The prophet Micah is pretty forthright:

With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

**And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.** (Micah 6: 6; NIV)

The story of ‘The Rich Young Man’ is one of the saddest stories in the Gospels. Mark tells us:
“Jesus looked at him and loved him”.

Yet he told him to go away and sell all that he owned – maybe the hardest words the poor chap had heard in his life.
“He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”
The gap between belief and practice.

It is very easy to become possessed by our possessions – or indeed by the lack of them.

Reading this story, we tend to focus on the first part of Jesus' command, "**sell everything you have**" and we worry about the huge problems we might have in giving up all of our possessions. But we need to pay attention also to the second part: "**give to the poor.**"

We are all stewards of our own wealth, but we are all charged with the duty of care **for all God's people**, especially the poor and the marginalised.

Yet from electioneering politicians to advertisements on TV and elsewhere, the emphasis seems to be on doing what is best for *ourselves* with little or no regard for our neighbour.

In the run-up to the Referendum in 2014 the Church and Society Council initiated a dialogue '*Imagining Scotland's Future*'. Frequently expressed findings were the need for tackling poverty, a change in attitudes to money, and the need for a redistribution of wealth to narrow the gap between rich and poor throughout society, rather than aspirations for personal wealth and individual gain.

In other words, in terms of key values for the Scotland of the future, justice, equality, fairness and well-being came far above personal prosperity.

We live in times when a footballer is transferred for a fee of £200 million – at a time when huge numbers of people worldwide die from diseases that are readily and cheaply preventable. Every 2 minutes a child's life is lost to malaria – a life that could be saved for only £1. Millions of people worldwide - at this very moment - are devastated by war, hurricane, flood, earthquake. The UK defence budget for next year is estimated at £48 billion, with up to £205 billion for replacement of Trident. *And so on.*

Money, and how we get it, and what we do with it, plays a big part in our lives. We need to take a fresh look at how it relates to what the Bible teaches us.

In 1st Cor. Paul offers a straight-forward plan:

"On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income...."

Routine, systematic giving as part of our daily life.

Stewardship is about using all of our resources in light of God's commands and promises.

In Jesus' world, the wealthy were part of the ruling elite at the top of a domination system that grossly exploited the poor. The wealthiest 2% got two-thirds of total production. The story of the rich young man points to the complicity of the wealthy in a system that impoverished the peasant class.

In our day the question for those who are well off financially is how to use the wealth they have been given to further God's passion for a different kind of world – the kingdom of God – as seen in Jesus. (Ref. Borg, Mark, 84-85)

Remember Jesus's invitation to the man: "Come, follow me."

Remember also his words, "I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullest.

*Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us,
saying, "Christian, love me more."*

Amen.