

Acts 11:19-30; 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15

I need to start by explaining something. Stewardship is not fundraising. Stewardship is our wise use of resources: body, mind, soul, time, talent and money, on a regular basis, every day of our lives. Fundraising is a financial effort that is short-term and for a specific cause. The two are different and yet the generosity behind them and the motivation or heart behind them is the same.

In today's passages we encounter Paul making efforts to encourage all his churches to send financial resources to struggling Christians in Palestine. In many ways nothing changed, Palestinian Christians are still struggling so many years later, and are in need of our help and support.

In Acts we see the beginning of the campaign while in 2 Corinthians we are 10 years on. Paul wanted his churches to financially help the church in Jerusalem over a sustained period of need. It's so easy to raise funds for an emergency appeal and forget all about the folks struggling a month or two later, not realising or not thinking that their needs are still great.

Paul hoped for a sustained effort. But it seems the enthusiasm of the Corinthians waned over the years hence in this letter he needs to remind them to keep on giving. I wonder whether a sustained campaign like that – to support struggling brothers and sisters in Palestine – is fundraising or is it stewardship? Open to debate as on one hand it was for a specific cause, on the other it was exercising the muscle of generosity over many years. It's the same muscle used in both. For Paul though this was more than just money issues. In Starters for Sunday the Very Rev Albert Bogle wrote: 'For Paul, this collection was an important contribution to building a sense of community and belonging within the church. He initiated it after he had made his first famine relief visit with Barnabas in 46AD. (Acts 11: 29-30) Paul encouraged all his churches to support Jerusalem.'¹

It was about standing together with your brothers and sisters in Christ who happen to be in need at the time. It was about the unity of the Church of Christ on earth. It was about solidarity and expressing our oneness in Christ in very tangible ways.

It's also about perseverance, about doing what we said we would, about following through with our commitments and promises we had made.

It's also about generosity of a community towards another one. It's about our response to God's great love and commitment to us that produces the grace of gratitude expressed in generosity. Rev Bogle tells us the following story that embodies exactly that: 'A few years ago I was visiting a project we in St Andrew's Church Bo'ness support in India. We had collected some funds and a group of elders and members had taken the money as a gift to help support the work as part of our visit. Towards the end of the visit, the pastor and a small group of his congregation took us to a restaurant for our dinner. At the end of

¹ http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/27377/S_and_F_-_Money_2015_-_Albert_Bogle.pdf, p. 3.

the evening the pastor made it clear that he wanted to pay the bill. I duly agreed thinking that the next day I would give him the money in private so as not to embarrass him in front of the group.

I well remember the next morning taking the Pastor to the side and offering to pay for the dinner. He looked at me with a quiet serene nod of the head common to the Indian culture and simply said, “Pastor Bogle you must allow the poor to be generous too”. These words have never left me. What he was doing far out-stripped our generosity. He was living out what he believed. He was blessing us with the extravagant generosity that he believed he had received through Christ. His gift has touched and shaped my life down through the years.²

When one is poor, when one is struggling, it is only too easy to become self-centred to the point of obsession. That Indian church didn’t succumb. The Macedonian churches mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians didn’t succumb. Despite their struggles, a very severe trial and extreme poverty, they overflowed with joy and generosity.

It’s a well known characteristic of people touched by God’s grace. We had seen it in the widow’s mite. We had seen it in another widow, the one from Zarephath, who, even though she had barely enough food just for one meal for herself and her son and no more, not even a prospect of getting any more, she still prepared a meal for a stranger – the prophet Elijah. There’s something consistently generous about a heart touched by God’s grace.

We’ve seen it all around us. We’ve seen it in our churches, in our communities and around the world. Just a few months ago the Session of the Birsay, Harray and Sandwick congregation gave a donation of £10,000 to the congregation of Namachete in the Thyolo Presbytery in Malawi to enable them to build a new church to replace the old one which was virtually destroyed by storm damage and flooding. The Namachete folk will provide all the necessary river sand and make 100,000 bricks for the project and the rest will be covered by the donation. This is absolutely mind-boggling. £10,000. Thanks be to God.

The passage we read today closes with this insightful paragraph: ‘Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

Our fortunes might turn at the drop of a hat. We know that from our own experience. As a little girl I was a happy wee soul until one fateful morning I ate some very dirty snow and landed in the hospital. That was a very scary experience that changed my life from one day to the next.

It happened to us as a church too although maybe not in such a dramatic fashion. Kirkwall East used to be the only congregation in Orkney that was self-supporting. This

² Ibid, p. 6.

meant that we paid enough of a contribution to the central funds of the Church of Scotland to pay for our own minister and a share for the mission of the Church. We are no longer self-supporting. This is largely due to the fact that the costs of ministry have risen in recent years while our congregational giving hasn't – the Ministry and Mission contribution is calculated on the basis of the last three years' income, we pay a percentage of that to the central funds which in turn pay my salary and all the other expenses. This means that suddenly we became an aid-receiving church – like all the other Orcadian churches, it needs to be said. We no longer pay for our own minister but we rely on other churches to pay more than just for their minister in order to help us out. Our fortunes might change at the drop of a hat. Thank God for one another, thank God for generosity, thank God for touching our lives and our hearts, thank God for God. Amen.