

Stewardship Sunday

If I may embarrass Helen for a moment, we were talking the other day and I happened to comment about how this Sunday was a Stewardship Sunday.

Possibly without thinking, her response was, “Oh no! Not again!”

You may be feeling something similar.

I wonder if Jesus’ disciples had the same reaction when Jesus started teaching and told yet another story, or made yet another point about money.

It’s a well known fact that Jesus spoke more about money than pretty much any other subject.

And he did so for good reason.

Richard Halveson, chaplain to the US Senate for 13 years, said:

“Jesus Christ said more about money than about any other single thing because, when it comes to a man's real nature, money is of first importance. Money is an exact index to a man's true character. All through Scripture there is an intimate correlation between the development of a man's character and how he handles his money.”

Jesus himself said, that you cannot serve both God and money (Matthew 6.24), and that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6.21).

Now of course, a year on from our Graciously Giving to God stewardship campaign and at the start of a new year, I want to say something about how we give to church.

But this morning I will do so only briefly.

Lullingstone and Eynsford PCCs ran a small profit for 2011; Farningham a small loss. Costs are rising in Eynsford and Farningham. In particular these two churches face a higher quota from the Diocese. Eynsford have an expensive building project.

Each of us need to review our giving to church.

For any of us in reduced circumstances, we may need to keep our direct debit the same, or even reduce it. But for others whom God has blessed financially it will be appropriate to adjust it upwards.

Please prayerfully respond to the letters from your treasurers asking you to do such a review.

But if I may, I wanted this morning to talk about stewardship in its broadest sense: in the sense of our stewarding of all that God has entrusted to us for his glory; be it time, talents or resources.

Let me begin by examining a popular misconception.
You may even have bought into this misconception yourself.

The misconception is this:
That the time in my diary, the talent I possess and the money in my pocket is “mine”.
For the truth is, it’s not!

If you ever watched the film Crocodile Dundee, you might remember Mick Dundee, the crocodile hunter saying this:

Well, you see, Aborigines don't own the land. They belong to it. It's like their mother. See those rocks? Been standing there for 600 million years. Still be there when you and I are gone. So arguing over who owns them is like two fleas arguing over who owns the dog they live on.

The truth is, we as human beings don't own anything. Everything we have, from the number of our days on this earth to the money in our bank accounts is a gift from God (James 1.17).

Not a gift for us to do what we want with; but rather something that we hold on trust. And we are answerable to God for how we use it.

I wonder if you've ever pondered Jesus' acted parable from our gospel reading this morning (Matthew 18.1-5); when his disciples were arguing over who was the greatest, he placed a small child in their midst and told them that unless they became like a small child they would never enter the kingdom of heaven?

What is it about a small child that makes her an example of what we should be?

Surely the answer is that the child is dependent upon its parents; he trusts his parents and it is grateful for what he receives from them.

Children do not have to work to provide their food and clothes; they don't even cook or clean.

Rather, they look to their parents to provide for their needs; never doubting for one moment that there will be food on the table or clothes to wear. And when what they need appears, they (generally) accept it gratefully.

So it should be, says Jesus, with us and our heavenly Father.

To be God's children means to be in a relationship of dependence upon our heavenly Father, to trust him, and to be grateful.

This dependant trust upon God does not, of course, free us from all responsibility.

The Bible is clear that we have a responsibility to work hard, to provide for our own needs and the needs of our family (2 Thessalonians 3.10), to give generously to God's work (2 Corinthians 9) and the care of the poor (e.g. Leviticus 19.10).

The Bible is clear that we have a responsibility to use our time and talents for good rather than evil.

But dependent trust upon God frees us from grasping and gaining and storing up in a desperate attempt to be happy or secure.

We are released to live a life of radical freedom, open to the promptings of God's Spirit, as a child is free to get on with her business of learning about themselves, of playing, of exploring the world around them.

So, how might we, in practice, be good stewards of the time, talents and resources that God has entrusted to us?

Number 1 - Our time:

If we are in full time employment, then much of how we spend our time may be dictated by our employer.

But even in this context, we can seek to make the most of our time; by working hard as if for God; by valuing and caring for the people we work with; by making decisions, even or perhaps especially tough ones, in a Christ-like manner.

Family commitments may take up much of our time; caring for children, grandchildren or elderly relatives.

Again, in these situations, opportunities abound to give, to serve and bring the love and joy of Christ to those we spend time with.

There is an old saying that the devil makes work for idle hands.

Many of us will feel that we are so busy that the devil might be lucky to get a look in!
We feel constantly time poor.

We will need to make conscious decisions about how we can put our time to good use; not giving it unthinking to those who shout loudest or who offer the greatest reward, or giving it to the things that make us feel good but are perhaps not the most needful.

But rather asking the serious questions of how might I invest my time most effectively;

How might I use my time to cultivate my relationship with my heavenly Father?

how might I use my time to create a marriage that reflects the relationship between Christ and his church?

to bring up my children or grandchildren in the fear of the Lord?

to build up my local community in justice and peace?

to care for the orphan, widow and stranger?

to share the gospel with those who will otherwise be lost?

And not insignificantly, how may I use my time to renew and reinvigorate myself, that I have the energy and presence of mind to be a blessing to others? God told us to take a Sabbath rest and gives us leisure for a reason!

Secondly, talents:

Again, if we are in employment, or have family commitments these will be the main arenas in which we will need to apply our talents.

If we have more time, then we will be able to use our talents in voluntary work, in caring, in community building.

We will all want to put our gifts and talents to use in the church.

If, as Bill Hybels says, the local church is the hope of the world, then we will want to put our talents to use in helping the people of God share God's love and build his kingdom.

Here we put our talents to tasks of eternal value.

Thirdly, money:

Wesley's approach to money was to sit down and work out how much money he needed to live and provide for his dependants. Any income over and above this he gave away.

So, as his income increased he simply gave away more.

Many Christians will do it the other way round.

Take 10% of their income and give it immediately to God, then use the remainder as they see fit, including giving free-will or thank offerings to God as appropriate.

Certainly this is how we do things as a family.

But stewarding our money is much more fun, much more of an adventure than just sorting out how much we will give to church and other good causes.

A couple of weeks ago I needed a new pair of shoes.

Having bought several pairs of shoes that leaked or fell apart quickly I thought I would buy a decent pair in the sales.

A trip round Bluewater proved frustrating. When I found a pair I liked I discovered that they had been made in the United Arab Emirates. Unsure of that country's human rights record I declined the pair of shoes.

I then tried Sevenoaks, and found a pair of great shoes in Hoades.

A very helpful man told me all about the shoes, where they were made in the UK, how to care for them.

I bought them, happy that I had been able to use my money to support a local tradesman and a British industry that paid fair wages to its workers.

As consumers we have tremendous power.

The supermarkets' responsibility is to make money for their shareholders. They are not interested in supporting local farmers or reducing environmental impact; they are not worried if they put local tradesmen out of business.

But they do worry about your money.

And how you spend your money will affect what they do – because they want their share of it.

By choosing where we bank, with whom we take out insurance, where we take our car for a service, where we buy our groceries or our cup of coffee, where our clothes are made and by whom, whose newspaper we purchase, who supplies our energy and from what sources, how we travel, and which charities we give to, we can use our money for good or ill.

The famous Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon wrote,
“It is not as hard to make money as to spend it well”

But as we chose how to spend the money God has entrusted to our care, we can strike a blow for justice, righteousness and goodness.

So let me conclude by saying, please give generously of your time, talents and money to God's work in your church. I believe passionately in the work of our churches and I hope you do to.

But please don't think that this is all there is to Christian stewardship.

In dependence upon God, trusting him, live lives of radical freedom, that bring blessing to others and that make God smile!