

The Giving of Money

Deuteronomy 26:1-1; Psalm 112; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 21:1-4

Talking about money and what we do with it sometimes seems a bit hard, and we can get all squeamish about it. And that's how I felt for some time. Then I realised, that next to the kingdom of God, money was the subject that Jesus talked about most frequently. And why? How I live as a Christian and what I do with money, can't be separated, because what I do with the money I have (whether it's much or little) says a whole lot about my relationship with God.

That's what we find in the Gospel story. Jesus watches rich people giving large sums of money, and then he sees an impoverished widow give two small copper coins (the smallest you got back then), and he says, 'This poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

This widow, who was among the poorest in society, gave all she had. By rights, she could have held on to at least one of the coins. But no, she gives both. In her giving there's no calculation. She doesn't work out what a tenth of what she had would be worth and put that in the collection plate – which is what the rich people were probably doing. She gives all she has.

Why such reckless generosity? Jesus puts the widow's gift in perspective. He says that the gift of two small coins was more generous than all the extravagant riches of the other givers. The value of any gift isn't set by its cash value, but by what it represents to the giver. It's set by its cost to the giver, in terms of what she or he has and by the commitment that's gone into it. For those rich people, their gifts were a drop in the bucket. For the woman it was the whole bucket.

In commending the widow, Jesus isn't telling us to bankrupt ourselves and give away all our money. Rather, he invites us to see her as a picture of total commitment to God. Her gift shows the extent her life was focused on God. It's a picture of utter trust in God. She gave, not a proportion of what she had, but everything she had.

I can relate to that. I've never been the slightest bit interested in how much parishioners give each week or each month, nor in how much we give to other charities. But I am interested in how we relate our giving to our relationship with God. I'm interested in whether we let God into our financial decisions – whether it's our decision on our offertory giving or our decisions on all the other things we do with our money. And I do make one assumption – I assume that anyone who's serious about following Christ, anyone who's prepared to let their faith make a difference in their lives, *is* giving regularly, both to the church and in other ways.

Reflecting on that story, we see that the amount of money isn't the issue. It's the commitment and the love that lies behind it. The widow shows us what generosity and relationship with God are all about. That's what we see in the reading from Deuteronomy. The Israelites were told to set aside the first fruits of their harvest as an offering to God. Why? Because of all that God had done for them. Their giving was a response to God's gifts to them. God had blessed them by freeing them from slavery in Egypt, leading them through the wilderness and giving them a land to settle in. Because of their relationship with God, they set aside the first and the best of what they had. It was their way of acknowledging God's generosity to them.

We're called to take our giving seriously, not because of some sense of 'should' or 'ought' but as a response to God's generosity to us. We give of our money, as well as of our time and talents, because God has given us so much. It's one of the ways we say, 'Thanks God.'

Paul has some useful advice about monetary giving in what he wrote to the Christians in Corinth. It's in a section about a collection that was being taken up to help the church in Jerusalem which was going through a tough time. Paul tells the Corinthians to set something aside on the first day of the week when they came to worship – that's about giving regularly. And he tells them to give according to their means, giving according to what they have, not according to what they don't have – that's about giving proportionately. And he encourages them to give generously. 'Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. So the advice is for us to give regularly, proportionately, and generously – and I find that's a useful recipe.

To unpack the idea of proportional giving. Jewish law laid down a giving level of 10%. It was called a tithe, and it included what one produced (often agricultural offerings, later money). The tithe was used for more than the operation of the religious system. Updating it in today's terms, tithing would mean what we give to the church, to various charities, and that proportion of our taxes which funds health and social welfare. But for Christians there's no hard and fast law. What we encourage is a proportion or percentage, so as our income goes up or down, our giving reflects that. But whatever method we use, I suggest we ask, Is my giving a genuine expression of my commitment to God, and does it reflect my appreciation of who God is to me, and what God had done for me?

What I find really interesting are Paul's reasons for encouraging us to be generous givers. It all stems from what Christ has done for us. For Paul, Christ's death and resurrection is *the gift* and the source of all other gifts. It's this that is 'the surpassing grace of God that he has given' us. The death and resurrection of Christ, is for Paul an event so huge and all-encompassing that it takes precedence over everything else. It's this amazing generosity that generates the abundance of gifts we can give. The grace of Christ is what can motivate us to be generous – that is, 'to excel also in this generous undertaking'. For Paul, the desire to give – giving of money and giving in other ways – comes from God's gift to us in and through Christ.

I can relate to that because it defines our giving (of money, or service, or time, or anything else) as a response to what we have already received from God. We give out of gratitude for what God has already given us. Which makes me curious about the back-story of the widow in the Gospel. What had happened to her, what had been going on in her life, to give her such a sense of immense gratitude, and such a trust in God, to encourage her to give as she did? I wonder...

So what has God given to you, in your life, that you want to say thank-you for? Do you have a sense of God generously blessing you, your family, your community? How is the Holy Spirit inspiring you to respond?

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