

# Sermon

Sunday 6 September 2020

2 Corinthians 8:1-15; 9:6-11

Building a Culture of Generosity - A Tale of Two Churches.

## Introduction

In introducing this series a few weeks ago, I explained that Paul wrote more than two letters to the church in Corinth. Some we do not have but we know he wrote because he refers to them.

Today's reading is important because it brings us to the end of a letter: "Corinthians is almost certainly two letters in the same folder. We are coming to the end of the first of these.

I would not be too concerned about these errors. Anybody who has dropped a lever-arch file knows that nothing ever goes back in quite the right place.

The important point is that Paul wants to end on a high.

## Giving

You will have got the hang of Paul's style by now.

Face to face he must have had enormous charm and energy.

Writing letters is not the same. Paul is frequently wordy saying the same thing many different ways. He does not want to be misunderstood.

In this passage one commentator described him as walking on eggshells.

What is Paul so sensitive about?

Money.

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We have inherited the same trait. This passage - “building a culture of generosity” - in our sermon series should be called “how to get people to give money”.

Very English. Building a culture of generosity is frightfully English. It could be the defence offered by a well-spoken highwayman. I am not a thief. I am just trying to build a culture of generosity.

Pyramid Selling

Paul is not into extortion or the use of violence.

But it looks like he is into a pyramid selling scheme. He asks each church to out-do the previous one.

He is pleased that his relationship with the church in Corinth is greatly improved and so he suggests the church might want to give generously to support the Judean church which is in crisis. Christians are suffering persecution and living in poverty. Just like the suffering church today.

Paul uses the Macedonian church as an example. The generous churches of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. (Buh-ree-uh) who themselves have been suffering have been generous.

He says to Corinth, look at how generous Macedonia has been. You should aim to give as generously.

Why was Macedonia generous?

So which church did Macedonia have to out-do?

If you know Paul's letters you will know it was Corinth.

Better than pyramid selling – circular selling. Paul could play Macedonia and Corinth off against each other for ever!

The battle of the red coloured pencil as each church shades in its thermometer chart.

[A sign of health](#)

It is not a war. Paul is pointing at something much bigger.

Paul sees generosity as a sign of health.

Corinth. Your troubles are behind you. Soon you will be well again and giving as generously as Macedonia.

We know he was successful by the way because in his letter to the church in Rome (Romans 15:26) he refers to the generosity of the churches of Achaia (uh kay-uh) and Macedonia. Achaia included the Corinth church.

Look at the details.

Look at the details.

Verse 1. The grace of God in the Macedonian churches.

Verse 2. Generosity in the face of poverty and persecution.

Responding to poverty whilst being in poverty.

Overflowing joy.

Versus 3 or 4. Giving as much as we are able. This wording is the expectation placed on the husband in a marriage contract. Not a fixed fee. A husband is expected to provide as much as he is able. The wife needs the money but also needs a husband giving as much as he is able – totally committed to the family.

The giving comes second

Verse 5. Paul says before they gave money in the Macedonian church, they gave themselves to the Lord.

A modern example might be when we pray the Lord's prayer and say, thy will be done.

We do not mean; we will enjoy watching your will being done.

We mean, let us discern your will and make sure it happens.

The churches of Macedonia said – thy will be done.

Generosity was the consequence.

## Poverty to Riches

And this is why Paul is clear that giving is not about a race to be poorest.

In verse 9 Paul warns against becoming an ecclesiastical version of the four Yorkshiremen sketch.

Luxury. You think Macedonia is poor. We dream of such riches.

## Agriculture Analogy

Instead Paul uses an agricultural analogy. Reaping and sowing. Cause and effect. Horse for courses. Returns on investment.

The Macedonian church was poor and stayed poor. The started off with nothing and still have most of it left.

Corinth is wealthy. They could be very generous and still be rich.

Give yourself first unto the Lord – then be generous.

The church needs to be full of generous people – not just money.

## Pulling Together.

And this is the nub of the issue. Generosity is step B of a two-step process. Step A is recognising and responding to the grace of God.

Paul says to Corinth. I am delighted you are responding to the grace of God. We will see it in your generosity. And he was right.

## St Mary's

So where is St Mary's?

St Mary's is a diverse church in terms of worship styles and Christian service.

Our unity comes from something deeper – and I believe that is our response to the grace of God.

Generosity is a form of Christian service and in our culture, it is largely an invisible one.

## Remodelling

Here is an example. Most churches who have remodelled have experienced this.

There is always a great debate about what needs to be thrown away and what could be done so much better.

Everyone has different views about what should be done. Everyone is united in not wanting the church the way it is.

Not quite everyone. There is often someone who remains silent and is quite happy with the church the way it is. And this person might generously give to the new project to show support. And that person might also

be someone who helped fund the previous refurbishment 30 years earlier. That is the model of Christian generosity.

## Maturity

Generosity – financial generosity – is the way we lend our support to those whose interpretation of bringing about God’s kingdom might be different from our own.

It requires maturity of faith. It is one of the pillars on which the church is built. It plays an essential part in maintaining unity. It is largely invisible.

The opposite is also true. A response to God’s grace which is only about what we want to do ourselves or with like-minded individuals is not a mature response. It gives rise to factions and division.

That is why Paul wanted to see generosity in Corinth. It would be a sign that the troubles were over.

## Andrews Departure

As we prepare for Andrew and Jenny’s departure, we have a big task ahead. We have to discern our part in “your will be done”. Some soul searching is needed.

How we describe our church to ourselves and others will impact who our next rector is. An important step.

## The Lesson

Thinking about giving is an ideal way to start this process.

Just as Paul pointed Corinth at Macedonia, let us look at each other before we look at our own shoes - the normal reaction to the stewardship sermon.

Think should about how we as individuals have been blessed and how we should respond to God's grace.

We should try and understand how giving and generosity works in St Mary's. Think about the different ways those around you serve.

Remember those who are quiet. Those who sit through the refurbishment discussions not wanting to get their own way but wanting to be supportive of the whatever way is chosen.

We should strive to see the invisible lines of force of generosity.

## Getting to Work.

Let us finish as Paul did.

Reading to the end of his letter from verse 12.

*This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.*

*Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.*

*And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

Amen