

THANKSGIVING, GIVING AND FORGIVING

Malachi 3:10-12

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

Luke 17:11-19

During 1993, I was working on an academic exchange at the University of Wurzburg in southern Germany. There was no Anglican church in Wurzburg, so I attended a Roman Catholic church. Talking to the priest there, I discovered that German clergy did not need to spend any time raising money, because of the Church Tax, which all Christians were required to pay by Government. So the churches were awash with money!

Here in England it was very much the same, for until the 1930's landowners, particularly farmers were required to pay the Tithe to the Church. The Wall Street financial crash of 1929 led of course to the Great Depression in America, which in turn led to poverty, unemployment, and bankruptcy here in England. So in the 1930's the Church's demand for the payment of the Tithe was seen as heartless and cruel, and there were violent demonstrations against the Church all over the country. In the end, payment of the Tithe was dropped, and the Church of England has been struggling financially ever since.

Our Reading from the prophecy of Malachi is about what happened when the people stopped paying the Tithe in Israel. God did not bless the

people, and the crops failed. A grim warning, but there's more to the Reading than just that. There's a promise of God's blessing if the people have a change of heart, and return to God with a full measure of devotion, and once again pay the Tithe because of that devotion.

In Germany, paying the Church Tax is a legal duty, and is much resented, causing people to leave membership of the Church. In England, payment of the Tithe was a legal duty, enforced by bailiffs, and caused people to leave the Church too. The message is clear – Christian giving should never be a matter of Duty, it must always be an expression of Devotion.

Let me tell you a short story.

An old man was sitting on a bus, holding a bunch of beautiful flowers. Opposite him sat a girl, whose eyes kept returning to look at the flowers. The time came for the old man to get off. Impulsively, he thrust the flowers towards the girl. *“I can see you like the flowers, and I'm sure my wife would want you to have them. I'll tell her I gave them to you.”* The girl accepted the flowers, and then she watched the old man get off the bus, and walk through the gate of a Cemetery.

This was a spontaneous act of love and sacrifice, which came from the old man having a big heart. There was no obligation to do what he did,

and the circle of love that he had known in his marriage was extended to include this unknown girl. True giving must always come from the heart. Giving to God, for God's work, must be out of Devotion and not out of Duty. Giving must be free and spontaneous.

I've spoken of the old man in the story expanding the circle of love. That's the theme of our reading from second Corinthians, which identifies three levels or circles of giving for God's work, assuming that Giving is all about our loving Devotion to God, and not simply about Duty!

The first level or circle is giving according to our means. That's sensible and reasonable, but is more Head than Heart. The second level, and bigger circle, is giving beyond our means, and of our spontaneous Free Will. That is more Heart than Head. The third level and much bigger circle of love, is giving ourselves in total sacrifice, in total commitment. That is all Heart!

But maybe this Sermon has started from the wrong end of things! Maybe it's not Giving I should start with at all. Maybe we should start with our Gospel Reading on the theme of Thanksgiving. Jesus healed ten lepers -

nine Jewish lepers, and one foreign leper who took the trouble to return to Jesus to thank him!

Following the Tithe war in England against the Church, William Temple offered this diagnosis of spiritual malaise:

“In most of us the spiritual life is impoverished and stunted because we give so little place for gratitude. Thanksgiving for God’s blessings is quite selfless, and is akin to love. All our love to God is in response to His love for us, it never starts on our side. We love, because He first loved us.”

The story of Jesus healing the Lepers is also a story about us! Our disease is not Leprosy, but Sin! Our healing was not achieved by a few words being pronounced over us. Our healing was achieved by the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, the ultimate level of Giving.

The big question for us is whether we bother to return to Jesus to give thanks for his sacrifice, and for the forgiveness and the healing which flow into our lives from it. Or do we imagine that we are God’s chosen people, and so don’t need to give thanks, just like the nine Jewish Lepers?

The sacrifice of Jesus, and the Work of Christ on the Cross, is God's great gift to each one of us. From it should flow Thanksgiving to God, Giving for God's work in the Church and in the World, and Forgiveness for those who have wronged us.

Today we are on the threshold of Lent, the time when we return to God, the time when we reflect on our own spiritual journey, the time when we prepare to go again with Jesus to Jerusalem, where he was to suffer and die for us.

So, forget Tithes and forget Duties. Our Faith is all about God's action, and our response, and an expanding circle of love and commitment. The territory of our Faith is mapped out by the interplay between Giving, Thanksgiving and Forgiving. Quite simply, we love because God loved us first!

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