

Mark 12 v. 41-44

June 26th 2011

The two year old little boy looked at his mother as he held in his rather sticky hand the remainder of a packet of smarties. 'Will you share them with me?' asked the mother in the hope she might begin to teach him a little about giving to others. He held out three sticky smarties two green and one orange. He looked his mother in the eye and ate the orange one leaving the two green ones. Then with a sophistication that seemed beyond his years he said, 'You **could** have had the orange one but I have just eaten it.'

The child's instinct, as very often is our own, is to keep as much as possible for himself.

Meanness has generated a number of jokes and stories. We all dislike being compelled to give, no matter what our belief. I've heard many people say, 'I left going to such and such a church', (and sadly, it **is** often a church), 'because all they ever talked about was giving money to them.' We don't like to feel compelled to give - I admit that I often delete the words on a form that say 'voluntary donation of £2', not because I don't want to give the £2, but because I want it to be my choice and no-one else's. You may know the joke about the Christian who was asked how much he gave away to God; he said. 'I take all my money and throw it up in the air. What stays up God can keep and what comes down is mine'.

Today, I'd like to focus upon, what we give, how we give and why we give in our Christian lives.

Firstly then what do we give? You may be surprised to know that most of you already give a large amount of money away. It's called income tax! Traditionally, before social tax systems, Christians and Jews gave one tenth of their income away to the church or the temple. Deuteronomy and Leviticus lay out rules and conditions of tithing (tithe meaning one tenth) in forms of food, wine, animals, cut wood and so on. The Jewish farmer in Israel would always leave a corner of his field for the poor to harvest and collect what they needed so they had no

embarrassment of asking. Today, many Christians tend to follow the practice of tithing 10% of income after tax, and that can be to a church community or split between a church community and charities. Some churches likewise give away 10% of their income to charities and others don't. Our cathedral doesn't have a process for giving to charity, so some people, I understand, split their 10% giving between the cathedral and charities of their choice .

Secondly how do we give? Giving is, of course, not only about money. We show our love to God through many other ways of giving. We are blessed here with over 250 volunteers, and many Christians give time and energy to working for charities and to their neighbours. As well as giving of ourselves we give financially. There are, according to the 12th century, Jewish leader Maimonides, 8 ways or levels of giving. The first is the lowest. This is when the giver gives something but gives it grudgingly. The kind of person who says, 'I'm afraid I had to give a £5 note to that charity collector because I didn't have any change.' The second level is when the giver gives far less than he/she could but does so cheerfully. The kind of person who finds a handful of change and smilingly puts it into the Red Cross collector's box. Jumping to the highest level: level 8 is when the giver offers a loan or a gift and enters into partnership with the person in need so that he/she may become self supporting. This is supported by the old Chinese proverb that says, 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.'

Christian Aid and many charities offer support at Maimonides highest level of giving where the money supports people to make their own earning. Take the example of Gustavo Talavera who is a small coffee farmer in Nicaragua. He was struggling to make ends meet. A loan organised by Christian Aid enabled him to expand his farm, build a small coffee -processing plant, produce organic coffee and then export it internationally. He then built a school for the community. Gustavo said to Christian Aid, 'We have used all the funds we have received sensibly; no matter how big or small your contribution, we will make the best of it. We are very thankful for your support. God gives us all the power to succeed.' This year for various reasons the cathedral did not collect for Christian Aid during

their week in May, so if you wish to support the work of Christian Aid as if from the cathedral, as you leave, you will see retiring collection plates.

What should we give, how should we give and now maybe most importantly of all why should we give? Our main reason for giving in God's world must be because we are grateful to God - we want to return our love and thanks to God – we have received and so we want to give back in thanks. It's a little like a parent giving a child £2 for pocket money and the child coming back in two hours with a present which cost 40 pence for the parent. Any parent receives such generosity with gratitude recognising the love that accompanies it. God has given us resources of money and by returning them to others in need to support God's work in churches or charities, we are returning them to God. The widow whom Jesus saw gave two mites - a mite was a 'lepton' which was a small coin 10-12mm in size which would have been weighed to determine its value (if you wish to see one I have been lent one to show you as you leave). The widow gave all she had to the Temple without any show or flamboyance – she simply gave a gift to God as part of her life, though the implication from Jesus is that she had very little left after she had given it away. This widow did not seem to calculate the limiting 10% but gave, it seems, her all. Her generosity seems very remote from the television programme, 'The secret millionaire' where a very wealthy person pretends to be someone else and finds out about people who are trying to help others or to set up community services. The secret millionaires always reveal themselves at the end of the programme and give a large cheque to the person to support their good cause. It makes for dramatic and gripping television. As the truth is revealed, a warm glow appears around the millionaire as he/she receives the gratitude of the people who themselves are so desperate for money to help others. I realise that the personal journey of the millionaire is of importance, but I often wonder why the millionaire needs to go through all the deceit – why after all couldn't the money just be given anyway? But then there would be no television programme! The widow in the Temple has set her heart on giving to God first – no warm glow, no arms flung around her neck in gratitude, no grateful smiles or tears, only her simple knowledge that she is returning to God the gift that has been given to her: here is a generous, poor woman who does not 'count

the cost' nor ask 'for any reward' but, as a matter of course, in her daily life gives to God. Maybe we are being taught by Jesus that the rich need to learn how to give generously by watching how the poor give.

Here we are in this well loved cathedral, attending a Eucharist, the Greek for 'thanksgiving'. We have come here in gratitude to God praying those words in the Eucharistic prayer, 'we give you thanks and praise'. We come here to thank God for all the goodness we have received, thank God for the death of Jesus and thank God that we can all partake in Holy Communion. We give ourselves back to God because we ourselves are grateful. We don't *want* to be a people who always say, 'thank you' but never return or show our gratitude: the kind of people who always take but never give. We are the holders of a purse however small or large and it is at God's behest that we give to others: we give to God because we have much to be thankful for.

Maybe the real generosity of heart is the giving that comes above and beyond that 10%, the giving that is motivated by thankfulness for a pay rise or for a personal, celebratory event or the gift for others in need that means we have to make a real sacrifice in our lives for God. The letter to Timothy says 'God loves a cheerful giver'. We know that our love for God demands our whole lives, we sing it often in the hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous cross...'

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all

We give our lives and ourselves in humble, gratitude to God, we give our wealth and our income thankfully and generously as we respond to that amazing love which demands, 'our souls, our lives, our all.'