

The Rector's Sermon

Stewardship Sermon- Sunday 3rd October 2021

‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’

For those who have been to the Holy Land will know that there are two inland seas of Israel. There is the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. These two inland seas provide an apt parable for the subject of stewardship, when we are asked to renew our response to the overwhelming generosity of God.

Both inland seas are linked and fed by the river Jordan. The Jordan flows out of the northern hills, entering the upper end of the Sea of Galilee and flowing out at the lower end, proceeding down the Jordan valley until it ends up in the Dead Sea.

Now the astonishing thing is that although the two seas are supplied by the same water, they are completely different in nature. Around the Sea of Galilee there are towns and villages in abundance. There are kibbutz's, birds' nest in the trees by the shore, fish abound in the waters. There is a vibrant tourist industry based on the water, with lots of wind surfing and sailing. It feels alive, it looks alive, it is alive.

The Dead Sea, on the other hand, has no villages, nor towns on its coastline. There are no pastures and there are no trees. No birds nest on the shoreline and there are no fish in the sea. It feels dead, it looks dead, it is dead.

Now the explanation for this is relatively simple. The Sea of Galilee is alive because it has an outflow. It passes the water on as swiftly as it receives it; it gives as well as it receives and that is why it is full of life and abundance, why it is alive. Whereas the Dead Sea lives up to its name because it does not have an outflow, it does not give, it only receives and as a result is gradually evaporating away under the hot sun, and in doing so becoming more and more poisonous as the salt levels increase and the waters decrease.

What an extraordinary illustration for us of the dangers of solely receiving without giving; that a life without giving poisons and destroys, whereas a life of giving is to be like God. God, the source of all life, is the greatest giver we can ever come to know. If God did not give us life, we would not have life. If God had not given us Jesus Christ, we would be living without hope, without redemption.

Any sermon therefore engaging with our Stewardship, our giving, must be focused on how we in turn respond to the extraordinary generosity of God. It is the fact that we are called as Christians to mirror God's extraordinary generosity, as well as God's love and hospitality that transforms our stewardship into a theological matter.

There is no better time therefore than during the season of harvest to relook at our stewardship – to renew and refocus our dependency on God and deepen our relationship with God. This won't happen when our dependency rests elsewhere, especially when it rests on the unhealthy pursuit of wealth as the foundation of our happiness.

'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'

The scriptures remind us that what we give already belongs to God, that we are stewards of God's creation and that we are stewards of all the gifts and talents that God has bestowed upon us. This is confidently stated in the great collective offertory prayer:

'Yours Lord is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty, for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you and of your own do we give you.'

The scriptures also remind us that our offering of our resources should be a joyful gift, for through it the needs of the poor and needy are engaged with; for our offering is for the Church's mission, it is for the continuing work of God, it is for the coming of God's Kingdom.

We need therefore to talk about our tithing, the offering of money we personally give to the mission and ministry of God's Church. Other than talking about the coming of God's Kingdom, Jesus talks more about money than anything else and yet we have conveniently made it rather poor form to speak openly about money. Well, Jesus didn't fear breaking convention and talked more about money than he did about Heaven and Hell combined. Eleven of the thirty-nine parables Jesus tells are about finances.

Money is so important because it reveals who we are, what our priorities really are. Jesus says quite unequivocally "for where your treasure is, there your heart will also be." Our tithing, our weekly giving of money is 'the sacrament of seriousness'. For it is the causes that matter most to us that we give money to. If our faith is embodied and a vital part of our lives, if the mission and ministry of St Margaret's matters to us, if the flourishing of the Church of England as the Church of all England, being a place of mission and ministry in every community matter to us, then our giving will be joyful.

I am very aware that so many of you already give so generously. And I am also aware that some of you may wish to become more involved but don't quite know how to go about it. The purpose of this Stewardship sermon is to ensure that our stewardship and our mission liberates the churchwardens, treasurer, and our PCC to strategically plan for the mission and ministry of St Margaret's, already assured of the pledges of talents, time and resources.

So please read the Planned Giving Forms very prayerfully, remembering that we are looking to make our response to God's generosity. Please see how your resources can together be used to glorify God, so that this church can continue to be like the Sea of Galilee, full of life, full of joy and full of vitality, an extraordinary and vital sign for all the people of Lee, Blackheath and Lewisham of the glory and majesty of God and the coming of his Kingdom. Let us be a sacramental church, one that mirrors the immeasurable love, generosity, and hospitality of God.

Let me finish with the great prayer of St Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit Order:

Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest;

To give, and not to count the cost,

to fight, and not to heed the wounds,

to toil, and not to seek for rest,

to labour, and not to ask for any reward,

save that of knowing that we do thy will.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen