

### THREE SAINTS STEWARDSHIP 18/11/18

I have been asked to deviate from the lectionary today and say a bit about stewardship, which is supposed to be about the three T's – time, talent and treasure, but inevitably majors on treasure, because bills have to be paid. In ten days or so candidates for the post of Priest-in-Charge of your parish will be interviewed and, hopefully, a selection of the right person will be made. I feel I've got to know you over the last few months, during which it has been a pleasure and a privilege to come and take services. Indeed, so fond have I become of the parish, that, had I been 10 or 15 years younger, I would have had a stab at applying myself. So what will the successful candidate find when he or she eventually arrives in the parish, moves into the Vicarage, and takes up the post? Well, for one thing a group of committed, motivated, intelligent and friendly people doing their best to live Christian lives and serve their communities as far as they are able. He or she will also find three lovely churches, absolute Somerset gems, all in a reasonably decent state of repair, but needing constant attention.

Some of you will have guessed what I am going to say next: he or she will also face a looming black hole in the parish finances, which will have to be addressed as a matter of priority if the diocesan share is to be met next year. It is always difficult to talk about money to congregations

because anything you say is always going to be an oversimplification. Some people give sacrificially, and some give less than the cost of a Sunday newspaper or what they would tip a taxi driver, most of us somewhere in between. Some people give abundantly of their time and their talents because they simply cannot afford to give more than a token amount of money, and that's important too.

So you need to go back to basics. Jesus spoke about financial matters a lot. One of the old trick questions asked of theological students is where in the Gospels does it say: "It is more blessed to give than to receive". Well, of course, nowhere in the Gospels. The quote is from Acts of the Apostles 20:35, but the early church described in Acts gives us a template of how Christians lived then, supporting each other, pooling their resources and financing those who went out to preach and spread the word. They did believe that it is more blessed to give than to receive and that God loves a cheerful giver and they acted on it. But there is lots in the Gospels about money and possessions too:

Giving and real treasures  
Travelling light

Camels and rich people  
Rendering to God and Caesar  
their due  
Don't neglect your tithes  
Sheep and goats  
The rich young man  
The widow's mite

Give... and it will be given to  
you

The two debtors

The rich fool

Do not worry about the morrow

Much is required

The shrewd steward

Pharisee and tax collector

Zacchaeus the tax collector

The ten talents

One of these, the widow's mite, is sometimes used as an excuse to be a bit stingy when the plate comes round, but of course the point about the widow's mite is not that she only gave tuppence, but that she gave all that she had. Thankfully we are not asked to give all that we have, but to try and aim for the Bath & Wells standard of 5% of net income after you've paid your tax and put a roof over your head, and as I understand it, this is for total giving – not just to the church. It really isn't much for most people, though it might be too much to ask of someone struggling on the basic state provision, which is why the matter is private and personal.

I spent five years as rector of a parish in northern California in the 1990's and what struck me right from the start is how amazingly generous the parishioners were. We had quite a few parishioners who gave a full Biblical tithe, 10% of their gross income. It's amazing what doors are opened when that happens. We had one man, a retired teacher who was a widower with no dependants, and he gave a double tithe, 20% of his income, plus he left us his house and truck when he died. One of the churchwardens said to me, "Isn't God good, Father, he lets me keep 90%

of what I earn". I didn't have the heart to point out to him that the tax man took a great chunk as well. Actually, he was a millionaire, and it is much easier for the very wealthy to be generous, though often they aren't paradoxically – which is why they are millionaires in the first place, I suppose. We had another man who was a surgeon earning about a quarter of a million dollars a year and a tenth went straight to the church - \$25,000 a year, around £17,000 at the time. I remember fervently hoping that he didn't suddenly decide to become a Methodist or something.

Now I refuse to believe that Americans are inherently more open handed than us, but they knew that if they didn't pay me I would have to leave. It was as stark as that. If they didn't pay for a priest, they wouldn't get one. English people seem to treat the Church as they do the NHS, something paid for out of taxation, and available when you need it. But, unlike our colleagues in some European countries, clergy are not paid for out of taxation, and most of your diocesan share goes to pay and house the clergy. But it is indirect. You don't actually directly employ your vicar, which has its advantages, but does rather distance the man or woman from the people he or she serve.

What further compounds the problem for us in Britain is that so many of our churches are old and need a lot of expensive repair and maintenance. In secular France any church built before 1905 is

maintained by the state, but we don't have that luxury. Keeping old buildings heated and watertight is a huge strain on parish finances and seem like a bottomless pit but a cost we are charged with meeting

When you add this together: diocesan quota, heat and light, repairs and maintenance, insurance, vicar's expenses, it is a huge challenge for a small parish with three buildings. And always in the back of your mind is the feeling that this is not what it should be all about. The church is people, not buildings, and our resources should be targeted at ministry and evangelism, not keeping the roof on. But we are where we are. The diocesan share seems like a burden, but it does provide the means for clergy to minister to their people, so should be looked on as an opportunity for ministry and evangelism. I'm afraid you're stuck with your church buildings, but they are beautiful and themselves can be used to further God's work. Jumble Sales and Fetes are great and bind people together to work towards a common goal, but they are not enough in themselves. I am sure there must be people in these three villages who, while they don't come to church much, perhaps value having one and might be prepared to put their hand in their pockets to help keep them open and there is another resource that could be tapped. Finally, consider giving as a joyful response to what Jesus gave for us and to further the work of His kingdom in a troubled and divided world.

