**St Giles – Giving for Growth!**

**Sunday Jan 31st (Fourth Sunday of Epiphany)**

Bible Readings: Proverbs 21: 1 - 8 1 Peter 4: 7 - 11

 **Mark 8: 27 - 38**

**Stewardship Campaign Series: Episode 3**

**The Way of the Cross**

 **Giving that costs everything but gains the world!**

Yesterday I caught the beginnings of a radio programme which encouraged listeners to share family secrets which had come to light in unusual ways. The catalyst for this was a family who had recently sadly lost an elderly relative. When it came to the difficult task of clearing his house they had discovered, to their surprise, that the beloved uncle had been a secret hoarder of all kinds of objects and documents. Although this was never apparent from the downstairs of his house, it was upstairs that he had stored everything from junk mail to old love letters. The family spoke of how, in life, he was a quiet man who rarely talked about his thoughts and experiences, it was sadly only after his death, in the things he had held back that they began to discover more of who he really was.

Today we’re continuing our Stewardship Campaign series Giving for Growth, looking at the theme of Christian stewardship through the lens of Mark’s gospel. We now reach a pivotal point in that gospel, the million dollar question from Jesus to his disciples, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ I’ve been a real traditionalist in this strange Covid year and kept my Christmas decorations up in the house until Candlemas which falls this coming week on Feb 2nd. At Candlemas, we remember Jesus being presented at the Temple at just eight days old in line with the Jewish tradition which had emerged from the Hebrew Scriptures of presenting the first born son as an offering, a life set apart – holy, consecrated to God for God’s service.

Mary and Joseph faithfully offered Jesus in this way and, as they did so, two devout, elderly worshippers saw what it would take Jesus’ younger disciples far longer to see – that this Jesus was indeed the long-promised Messiah, the Saviour – the light to reveal God to all the nations and the glory of God’s people Israel. The two who recognised Jesus in this way, distinguishing him from all the other babies being presented at the Temple, were Simeon and Anna. As well as blessing the newly formed family, Simeon and Anna played their part in warning Mary and Joseph that this would be a costly offering, both for them and for Jesus, that it would lead to the fall and rise of many, that it would expose the true motives of many hearts, that it would involve suffering and sacrifice, that the fulfilment of Jesus’ calling and mission would come at a high price.

Unlike Simeon and Anna, Peter, in our gospel reading, cannot face this kind of honesty. He has this moment of great revelation, entering into the family secret that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the long-awaited one, something he’s brave enough to confess openly. But as soon as Jesus begins to outline the costly implications of his calling, ‘the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected . . . ‘ Peter has to take him aside and have stern words with him. Peter can accommodate a discipleship that involves following an easy road to swift and decisive victory, a rapid rise to obvious power and supremacy. But he can’t countenance the way of the cross. He wants to somehow try to protect and shield Jesus from giving everything of himself, even his very life and find a different, less costly way. But Jesus rejects this course of cheap grace in the strongest of terms. Half measures and holding back will not achieve the greater purpose God has in mind. Jesus willingly pours out his very lifeblood in order to win the whole world, not by force but through sacrificial love – nothing else will do, nothing less than his life will cover the cost and pay the debt incurred by all the brokenness and brutality fallen human beings have inflicted on the world.

Christian stewardship always holds close to its heart this greatest of all gifts, Jesus’ willing offering of himself at the cross. Whatever we may give will always seem so little in comparison to this. It’s so much harder to hold back when we realise the extent to which Jesus has given himself for us. And now, having set Peter to rights, Jesus calls not just his close disciples, but the wider crowd as well to hear ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lost it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life.’

In the management of our finances and in our giving, as much as in the worship we share together on Sundays, we proclaim a message about who Jesus is to us. The way we approach our bank balance is as much a part of taking up our cross and following Jesus as is our prayer life or our love in action serving our community and the wider world. Money is not by any means the only thing we can give to God, the most important and precious thing we can give is just everything of who we authentically are. And as we do that we discover that, amazingly, we never lose out, we can never out-give God, we only gain the kind of life in all its fulness Jesus went to the cross to win for us. As writers Christian Smith and Hilary Davison put it in their book *The Paradox of Generosity*: ‘*Those who give their resource away, receive back in turn. In offering our time, money and energy in the service of other’s well being, we enhance our own well being as well . . . By clinging to what we have, we lose out on higher goods we might gain. By holding on to what we possess, we diminish its long term value to us . . . In short, by failing to care well for others, we actually do not properly take care of ourselves.’*

We try to reflect these principles of sacrificial and costly discipleship in our giving as a church. Since 2016, we’ve not held back on our historical reserves as a church. Instead, we have put them to good use, to invest in growth and mission, even when of course our reserves are limited. We’ve done this primarily through funding the part-time salary of our Children’s and Families’ Development Worker, Jen Watson. She has done and continues to do fantastic work in connecting St Giles to a whole host of children and families, in homes and at our local schools. We might never have made these new connections had it not been for our financial investment in this vision. Through Jen and the team she has built, we as a church have been able to minister to these children and families in a wide variety of practical and spiritual ways. This has carried on creatively throughout the pandemic, through online resources amongst other things. On Feb 14th, Valentine’s Day, you’ll have the opportunity to hear more about this in a special Thanksgiving Service for our Childrens’ and Families’ Work we’ll be holding as a 10.30 am All Age Service on that day. This visionary investment has made a significant contribution to the current as well as the future growth of St Giles. When we put together a timeline at Candlemas last year showing when different people had joined our church, it was so encouraging to see the number of dots which had appeared in just the last two years – many of them children and families.

Another example of these principles of sacrificial and costly discipleship at work in the way we steward our church finances would be in our missionary giving. Some might say, at a time when we are so stretched financially ourselves, surely we should hold back and just concentrate on meeting our own needs, not giving any of our precious resources away to others. I’m thankful though that our PCC is so shaped by Jesus’ example of costly self-giving for the benefit of the wider world. When we discussed our missionary giving policy recently at PCC, we felt strongly that we should avoid the temptation to become more parochial in our outlook. Despite the financial challenges we face, we still want to play our part in addressing wider local, national and global concerns. This again is a visionary stance - giving, not just when we have something to spare, but a proportion of our regular income as a church. For this year, in light of the additional pressures Covid-19 has placed on our finances, we have set the proportion at 5% rather than 10%, allocating the amount we would usually give away to home mission to support our Children’s and Families’ Development Worker because we feel maintaining this staff post is so vital to our mission and ministry as a church. We’re asking you to take part in nominating charities you would like to benefit from our missionary giving this year. A mailing is on its way this week to everyone on our electoral roll to enable you to have your say and to provide other more detailed information about stewardship at St Giles.

These are just two of the ways in which we are trying as a local church to take up our cross and follow Jesus when it comes to our finances. We cannot ask others to do this if we don’t first take the lead as a church. We’re very aware too that people may be carrying very heavy loads financially and in other ways as a result of the pandemic and its longer term impacts. Even in this week, we reached that tragic milestone of 100,000 precious, unique lives lost to Covid-19 in our own country, adding to the 2.2 million people who have so far sadly succumbed to the disease worldwide, each one known to God by name. Our hearts and our prayers go out to all those suffering loss at this time, as well as to those whose jobs and livelihoods are so uncertain at the moment. As we look to Jesus, who pioneered the costly way of the cross out of the depths of his love for us, we know that he will continue to give himself fully for us, that he will be committed to carrying our crosses with us and for us, that the cost, however high, will be worth it because there is always the empty tomb, the resurrection, new life and new growth ahead. Amen.