

## **St Giles – Giving for Growth!**

### **Sunday Jan 24th (Third Sunday of Epiphany)**



Bible Readings: Haggai 1: 1 - 11    Romans 11: 33 – 12: 8  
**Mark 12: 38 - 44**

### **Stewardship Campaign Series: Episode 2**

#### **The Widow's Offering**

#### **Giving that goes the extra mile**

So often it seems to be those with the very least in material terms who seem to show the greatest generosity. Not long after I first became a Christian in my teens, our church youth group had the opportunity to travel to Poland to work alongside some churches there. This was before the fall of the Berlin wall, Poland was still under a communist regime. There were food shortages and queues outside of shops for basic necessities such as bread. Many items were only available on the black market. And yet families from the churches warmly opened their homes to us and welcomed us with such generous hospitality. Nothing went to waste. I can remember the hostess I stayed with carefully gathering up any tomato seeds left on our plates so that she could replant them in her window box. We had to be very careful about commenting on things we liked around the house because the first impulse from our hosts would be to offer those things to us as a gift. Those early experiences of a way of life centred around costly and sacrificial giving had a profound impact on me. We can probably all think of our own examples of generous giving, those which have made us sit up and think, which have caused us to review what we give and what we hold back.

Today is the second in our Stewardship Campaign series on Giving for Growth. Last week's message on the Feeding of the Five Thousand is still available to download as a PDF from our website or to watch through our You Tube Channel, as indeed is the message today. Stewardship involves the wise management of all the resources that have been gifted to us by God – all that we are and all that we have. Last week we noted a movement from scarcity to abundance as seemingly small offerings were willingly given in response to great need. This week we see an example of giving that goes the extra mile, that goes above and beyond and, in doing so, raises profound challenges about wider stewardship issues in society as well as in the church itself.

Firstly, let's notice where Jesus positions himself in our Gospel passage today. He sits down right in front of the equivalent of the offering plates in the Temple, in this case the thirteen trumpet-like receptacles where people would place their gifts, in various forms, for Temple use. Jesus positions himself to see what is given and the manner in which it is given. This is something he cares about because it can be one indication of the strength and health, or otherwise, of the spiritual community. This goes hand in hand with Jesus' frequent teaching about money – both the use and abuse of it. We often tend to think of our finances and giving as being an entirely private matter. Part of good stewardship is indeed maintaining appropriate confidentiality around it. In Matthew's gospel we find Jesus teaching that, when it comes to giving to the needy, we shouldn't make a boastful exhibition of it, but rather give without even letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing. Our giving is personal, but it does involve both accountability and responsibility before God – we can indeed pray with our bank statements, as well as our Bibles in hand.

And in this optimal viewing position, as so often happens, Jesus notices the person no-one else would be likely to notice. Yes, there's a multitude of more wealthy visitors who toss in large sums of money. But on closer examination this costs them next to nothing, it's their small change, their surplus, the bit they have left over. They still have plenty to spare and the questions are less about the amount they've given and more about what they've held back.

And then a poor widow comes along. Her age, her gender, her social and economic status make her one of the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. She would almost certainly have been without any source of steady income. Throughout the Old Testament and into the New, there's an insistence that widows and orphans be given special attention, that they be provided and cared for by the community as those who have no other means of support. And yet here, we seem to find roles reversed. It is the widow who gives more than anyone else. She is not the recipient of generosity but rather the example of it. The coins she has are the smallest in the currency of the time, and yet the offering she makes is the most costly of all because this is not her spare change, but all that she has to live on.

There are challenges for us here in terms of the proportion of what we give in relation to the income we receive. In the case of the many rich people making their offerings that day, their giving appears disproportionate because it is tiny in relation to their total wealth. In the widow's case, her giving appears disproportionate because it is vastly in excess of what she can actually afford. Jesus is not here commending destitution or ensnarement into debt as good stewardship in any way shape or form. But each of us can pray about and give an amount which is in good proportion to our regular income – some use 10% as a measure, based on a pattern known as 'tithing' in Scripture, for some it might be 5% for others it may be more or less. One of the most helpful principles is outlined by St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (9: 7):

*'Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'*

Can we be sure here that the widow gave cheerfully, without compulsion? Biblical scholars seem to suggest not, particularly when we look at the wider context of Jesus' teaching in this part of Mark's gospel. Both immediately before and after this passage, Jesus strongly condemns religious corruption which results in the exploitation of the most vulnerable, which is more concerned about the excessive fabric of the building than it is about the fabric of the society it serves. He talks about widows' houses being 'devoured' by some unscrupulous religious leaders - perhaps a reference to overcharging for legal advice, seizing of property for non-payment of tithes, defrauding of assets an abuse of gifts and hospitality offered. Jesus' observation that the poor widow had given everything she had is not necessarily a commendation but, in context, more likely an indictment of the injustices in society which have put her in that position in the first place. Good stewardship also involves addressing these wider issues of social justice, fairness and equality.

Finance and social justice are inextricably linked and good stewardship will always acknowledge that. We have seen plenty of examples of this link in our news just this week. We began the week with a debate in parliament about the increasing sense of need to ensure that the additional £20 per week of universal credit continues beyond 31<sup>st</sup> March in light of current circumstances. There has been the announcement by a major consumer goods company that by 2030 it would only use suppliers who ensured their workers were paved at

least the living wage, in an attempt to break cycles of poverty and improve living standards for low-paid workers worldwide. There has been the sentencing and imprisonment of several of those who profited from horrendous acts of human trafficking which led to the appalling deaths of 39 Vietnamese workers who had been exploited into paying between ten to thirteen thousand pounds each for supposed safe passage into the UK. Our individual giving to St Giles allows us as a church to play a small part in addressing some of these issues, for example by way of the charities we support collectively through our missionary giving and through raising awareness. Even in the financial challenges we face as a local parish, our PCC leadership has been keen to ensure that we maintain this wider global and social concern, offering support where we can.

As with all of Jesus' teaching, there is so much more to this widow's offering than meets the eye. I wish we knew her name or that we could have a chat with her. But let's notice what a legacy of learning about stewardship she leaves us and consider that legacy next time we come to review our own giving, together with the impact it can have.