

IT doesn't usually happen that you know in advance what I'm going to say in this pulpit – it doesn't always happen that I know in advance. But we trailed it last week. I want to talk about stewardship – and specifically about stewardship of money

IT is almost exactly a year since I preached on this subject – and in common with what happens in most Anglican churches up and down the land I return towards the end of our church accounting year to the theme. Many responded generously to my sermon last year. Can I first of all again express from the pulpit what I have already expressed individually to those who responded positively the thanks of all of us at St. Laurence's for your generosity of spirit and action. Numbers of people last year responded to my sermon by switching to standing order, by gift aiding what they give or by increasing their giving –and various combination of those options. To all of them and to all who have continued faithfully to give during the last year can I express a very public and a very sincere thankyou.

And just one other word about the reaction to that – several people who we approached last year came up to us and said 'look we really can't afford to give any more we're on a fixed income and in fact we might have to give less. That is perfectly understandable. All that is asked of any member of St. Laurence is that we individually before God reflect on the extent to which we can match up the Church's standard of five per cent of disposable income to building up the work of the church and five per cent towards relief of need in the world around us. If the outcome of those reflections is that this is not possible then all we can ask is that people give what they are able – but also that there may be members of our congregation who might be able to give beyond what the church recommends so as to stand alongside those who are not able to reach that standard.

I know that there are those who ask what we are doing taking about money in the context of worship at all – shouldn't we be lifting our thoughts and our minds to higher, spiritual things. My answer to that is a general answer and a

specific answer. My general answer is that Christianity is an exceptionally material religion. It uses material things to proclaim the glory of God. It takes water and uses it to join individuals with Christ through baptism. It takes bread and wine to feed us with the very life of Christ. It puts together stones to create buildings which cry out with the glory of God. It tells of a Lord who smeared a man's face with mud so that he could see. Of a God who saw all that he had made and saw that it was good

And so we ought not to be afraid of dealing with something as material as money. Money can be put to bad uses, to wrong uses; but in our hands can become sacramental. It can speak of our joyful response to God's calling of us, God's loving us. Our using of money to serve God and to serve neighbour can be a powerful sign that God intends to call the whole of creation back to its intended purpose of shining out with the glory of God, of being filled with his presence.

And the practical reason for speaking about money in a spiritual context. Alone among the major world religions, the Christian faith speaks of a God who gives himself for us. He offers himself to us in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ he lays down his very life for us. A sacrificed Lord who calls us to give of ourselves as well – to give and not to count the cost as the well known prayer of St. Ignatius Loyola puts it. The way we use our money is a direct test of the extent to which we have heard that message to live not for ourselves alone. Do we hug our money to ourselves putting ourselves first – or do we open our hands and offer sacrificially of our resources so that the world around us can be healed and the Church of God go forward.

And that is especially so in our generation. Because in our hands God has laid a great responsibility. For us the choice is stark. In previous generations, the Church could get by on dead people's money. It could get by on paying clergy small remuneration and hardly providing for their retirement. In our generation that has changed. Historic resources have

dwindled and are largely devoted to preventing the black hole in the Church of England's Pension Scheme from getting even blacker. If the clergy of the Church of England are to be paid and if the work of the Church is to go forward, then it falls to the people of God who are the Church to ensure that that will happen. That is a great challenge – but it is also in a real sense a great privilege – it means that if the Gospel is to go forward then it will go forward because we who are the People of God in our own day have enabled it to happen.

Mike Beazley in his letter which we circulated last week relates that challenge to our situation here at St. Laurence's. He puts the picture very clearly. Our planned giving – the regular committed giving by the people of St. Laurence's - does not match up to our obligations to pay our share of ensuring the clergy are paid through our payment of Parish Share to the Diocese and to our commitment to practice what we preach by giving back 10% of what we receive through planned giving to the relief of need in our world – that we are able to do both those things rests on the unplanned

giving primarily of those who do not belong to our church. And of course that also means that the rest of our work here too is financed largely by those who give in an unplanned way – many of them in fact visitors to our church rather than regular worshippers here.

So today is primarily a day about discipleship. It is a day about we who are the people of God here at Laurence's living out the obligations of our discipleship - having less ourselves so that the work of Christ and of His Church can go forward

So much generosity is shown already – we need to build on that. The call is to every member of St. Laurence's to ensure that they are committed to regular, planned, committed, sacrificial, tax efficient giving for the well being of our church. Regular and planned – because that enables us to have a reasonable overview of what we are likely to receive in any one year and so to be able to budget properly,

especially when it is given through a standing order commissioned through individuals' banks so that the costs of collection are diminished for us. Committed - to reaching the level of 5% of disposable income after we've paid our basic bills to the church 5% to the world around us - because that gives us a standard to aim at and to work towards even if few can't quite get there yet. - because again that gives a certainty about the amounts that will be received. - Sacrificial - because we serve a Lord who calls us to spend and be spent. Tax efficient - because 25p from the taxman for every pound that we give by way of Gift Aid is not to be sniffed at Standing Order Forms are available on the chest today - as are Gift Aid declarations - do please use those freely - even if already giving to increase your giving - if not giving then to initiate that - and certainly to Gift Aid if at all paying Income Tax at the standard rate

The challenge is real. There is so much that we can do together at St. Laurence's. God willing through the Vision

Project major work to our church building will be paid for through grants and through donations. But it is the ordinary day to day work of our church which needs funding and sustaining - and for that we can only look to ourselves. For it is we are called in our generation to take up the challenge of discipleship - the challenge to build up Christ's Church - it is a privilege and it is a privilege which each one of us is called joyfully to accept