

## Stewardship Sermon No 3.

Sunday 19 March 2017.

### **Jewish Riches**

Out of the depths of the Old Testament we have discovered that the core of our relationship with God is one of generosity not legalism. We began by looking at Abraham and Sarah in their old age sent by God away from their home territory. They did not know where that journey might lead, they did not want to change but they trusted God and he rewarded them with the gift of a child in their old age and through that child they were blessed and became a blessing to other people.

We then found that the Jewish tithe was administered so that the community could hold a great party to which the poor, the homeless, the widows and the foreigners could all come. It was both celebration and service. Other elements of Jewish rural life developed which we might recognize today: the first fruits were given to God in a Harvest Festival; the land was to remain fallow on the seventh sabbatical year; the poor could glean and in the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee, slaves would be freed with enough money in their pockets to see them on their way.

So generosity is written into the core of our faith – a generosity which reflects God's love as creator of all.

### **Overcooked Eggs.**

However, like a fried egg overcooked, the outside of this relationship with God becomes hard and the centre unappetizing. Jesus realizes that and in this extract from St. Mark's Gospel today [12. 38 – 44] he compares the arrogance of the scribes – the faith professionals who make a living from the Law – with the poor widow whom the professionals exploit.

Both the scribes and the rich people put into the Temple coffers large amounts of money from their abundance but the widow puts in all that she has – a costly sacrifice. She put in two small coins (EG the size of small buttons) which would have barely made a noise compared to the show of the rich. The widow could have just put in one coin but she put them both into the collection box. She held nothing back.

Jesus compares outward religiosity with wholehearted devotion. Both support the temple but one set do it out of show, to support the status quo and to gain from their extravagance; the widow does it through a committed spiritual life style. Her genuine piety assumed a total self-giving with no fuss and no holding back.

## **The Rutland Challenge.**

We live in an affluent part of the world: LE15. That is not a criticism; it is a fact. Many of us will know poorer parts of the world. Some have just come back from holiday where we saw on the ski slopes huge privilege and in South Africa, terrible poverty but a poverty which was joyful. We are not told whether the widow was joyful or not. However, she was not afraid to appear in the temple courts where she was inevitably overshadowed by the scribes and lawyers.

As we review our own stewardship of time, talents and money this Lent we can take inspiration from Abraham and Sarah, from the Jewish tradition of generosity and from the dedicated widow who gave all to God.

And we will need that inspiration as our levels of giving in this benefice are not generous. The average weekly gift across the benefice is £6.40. The diocesan average is £10.23 and the National Average is £11.00. So our average giving level is not impressive. In fact, it is worryingly low – not just on a financial level but on a spiritual attitude too, as I have tried to show. However, there is hope and it lies in the direction of God's generosity to us shown at this time of year as we journey to the cross, the ultimate symbol of sacrificial giving. We all need to be challenged with God's generosity and frankly £6.40 a week for many of us is just loose change. Do we believe in a loose change God? Of course not! We can massively improve together. I know from recent experience that if we keep reviewing our giving annually – as we would do for our energy bill or car insurance – then we will grow our generosity hugely. And I don't mean just in terms of finance. Blackburn Cathedral sits in a deprived area but the congregational giving is £10.22 per week and it is that high only because we reviewed our stewardship every year. It enabled us to run 50 stewards and over 100 other volunteers as well as making up a third of the annual income needed to run the Cathedral. As Jesus said – re-assuring a frightened flock - *'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'*. [Lk. 12.34].

Several parishes in our benefice are currently renewing their giving. It is an urgent matter. But if you are not on the stewardship/planned giving scheme then speak to someone today before you leave church. The matter is urgent – not urgent financially but urgent spiritually.

Let me finish with a little story. The chicken and the pig were viewing the Church Notice Board. It advertised the Stewardship Ham and Egg Supper. The pig said to the chicken, *'For you it is a contribution but for me it is complete surrender'*.

Complete Surrender: the dying words used by that Olympic hero of "Chariots of Fire", Eric Liddle as he died in a Japanese Prison Camp after a short life of glittering service.

Amen.