

The first sermon in this series looked at the response of Abraham and Sarah to the call of God. 'Go!' he said, 'and leave your home and follow my directions'. [Genesis 12. 1 – 5]. They left, childless, for they knew not where. In this incident we identified three critical elements: they left behind their old life; they put their trust in God to deliver; they were blessed with a child in their old age and became a blessing to many. God blessed the barrenness of Abraham and Sarah making it blossom. The incident is a reminder to us that obeying God, putting our trust in him more and more, will allow us to be a blessing to others.

Building on that experience of those two elderly people, let us move on to **consider how God instructs the Israelites to be generous** – and through the Jewish tradition to our own faith. We find these instructions deep within the pages of the Jewish Law [Deuteronomy 14. 22 – 15. 18]

- i. They are to give away a 1/10 of their produce for a great party to celebrate God's creative gifts. If they live too far from the party, they should turn their goods into money and buy provisions for the party nearer to the celebration spot. So the Jews – and us – celebrate the work of the creator God.
- ii. The Jews are to invite the poor, the widows, orphans, foreigners and homeless to the party too! Every third year the tithe was given directly to the poor.
- iii. Every seven years debts were cancelled and slaves were to be given their freedom. This should not be done grudgingly but with enough money to provide for their independence. Hence these ancient guidelines for generosity also included a socio-economic demand.

These provisions indicate something of **the character of God**: that he is the creator of all that we hold in trust; that he shows compassion and concern for the weak and helpless; that God is the liberator of the oppressed and powerless. The Christian tradition has inherited these values. We believe in a creator God; we are encouraged to hold on to the concept of tithing through giving 5% of our disposable income to and through the church and 5% to other charities. With this income, the church can continue to be a community of people who are compassionate and sensitive to the needs of others.

In the gospel today [John 3. 1 – 17], Nicodemus, a serious Jew, is passionate to find a new way of life and comes to Jesus at night. He has seen in Jesus something different, challenging and wants to know how to adopt it. Jesus explains that the old and the new life exist together. It's the way we interpret them. The key is the cross of Christ which he anticipates. It is pain and loss but it is also the result of obedience and is thus also victory, joy and glory. A serpent is a deadly creature but – through their serum or the uplifted cross – it can be the sign of healing and fulfilment.

So often we see our generosity in grudging terms but the OT tradition together with Jesus and his example encourages us to see it as an opportunity to help others. So we are invited to contribute eagerly for so doing we are only giving back to God what is his anyway.

Amen.