

GIVING CHEERFULLY – 2 Cor. 9:6-11

The context of today's epistle is the collection among the churches of Achaia for the poorer churches and St Paul uses the occasion to outline some basic principles about giving. Firstly, however, it is important to look at the question of what we give and what we can give. Of course, what we have or what we own are part of the answer but of far greater significance is what we are. In today's world at the human level we see this as echoed in so many situations. We hear cries like "you were never there as a husband or wife when I needed you. Or "You were too busy working to be a real father" or in my profession "you were always in church or listening to somebody else". I am an avid listener to BBC Radio 4 and to a programme called "You and Yours". This week there were several interviews with husbands and wives later in their lives who deeply regretted that they had not spent more time, quality time as it's called, with their children when they were young because they were always working to make money and advance their careers. And in many cases they admitted the folly of trying to make up for it by buying them things. Their pain was very evident. Yes. In a very real sense as persons we are gifts to each other, important cherished gifts, which, if neglected for whatever reason, will cause great injury to those near and dear who need us.

The call to us from scripture is "My child, give me your heart. I shall fulfil all things". In the same way as at the human level, it is ultimately ourselves that God is requesting because that gift is far greater than all material possessions. Recently, on a visit to my mother-in-law in Scandinavia (no mother-in-law jokes, please) I passed two of Mother Teresa's nuns in the street and my thoughts turned to the founder herself. What strikes you about her is how much this little Albanian nun achieved concretely with so little because she gave her all. In fact, she achieved far more by giving her life to the service of God than money could have produced. This 'all' is symbolised in theology by the heart, where God wishes to dwell more fully. Thus it involves our struggle to offer more of ourselves to Christ by liberating ourselves from the self in the egotistical sense and opening up the hidden self, the individual riches of the Kingdom within us. "Eagerly enter the treasure house that is within you and so shall you see the things that are in heaven", writes St Isaac the Syrian. In this way our human talents shine and can radiate good to all concerned because they are transparent and a vehicle for the Holy Spirit. And part of that struggle concerns the picture we have of ourselves and our desire to write the script of our lives and our future path for God. No, the strengths we have often lie in other places and this is why obedience to a spiritual director or priest can be an extremely valuable school if handled correctly. Others frequently see us far more clearly than we see ourselves. If we can throw the balls up in the air, let them fall where they will and listen to God speaking to us through others, we can often reach a greater understanding of ourselves and give far more effectively and powerfully.

So giving is fundamentally about our individual service or 'diaconia'. All of us are called to be deacons or servants in the footsteps of Christ who "emptied himself" by taking the form of a man and becoming a servant of mankind. Now it is exactly here that the motivation for

giving starts. We can be moved to compassion and literally to tears by the sad plight of others in this world and produce huge acts of charity. But perhaps the core of all giving is a simple understanding of the verse that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”. And the mystery of God emptying himself and giving all unto death is the essence of our faith, which inspires us to imitate him. But in this process is also involved the virtue of joy. We are told, “Each of us should do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”. There is a certain freedom involved here, which tests us. Of course duty and responsibility play an important part but when we stop feeling joy in our giving, perhaps then we have to reassess the situation. Sometimes we need to learn to say no. Sometimes we are giving too much in one place and actually denying others who need us. And I suppose this is actually tied up with God taking our action and using it in his own way for the extension of his Kingdom. Sometimes we shall see the results, at other times not. We have to learn to accept the latter, of giving unconditionally, without seeing results or experiencing gratitude but having faith in divine providence. Thomas Merton somewhere has a prayer in which he asks God for the gift of giving without wishing to see the result. Another more famous saint put it like this, “to labour and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do thy will”.

So let us start our giving from a sense of peace with God and ourselves and in a spirit of thankfulness for what we have received. At the end of the service we shall pray “Give peace to thy world, to thy churches... for very good gift and every perfect gift is from above coming down from thee the father of lights”. Nothing is our own. Possession always involves our being possessed by another. We give and curiously find new gifts within us. Giving and receiving are spiritually interconnected. As St Paul says “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance”. If we have this attitude of simplicity before God, that nothing is ours but that we are extremely rich in Christ then in a strange and paradoxical way out of our apparent spiritual and materialistic poverty will come great riches “to scatter abroad and give to the poor” to use St Paul’s words. Amen

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