**GIVING CHEERFULLY 2 Cor. 9:6-11 and THE SOWER St Luke 8: 5-15**

Today’s epistle centres on the importance of giving. The epistle to the Corinthians deals with the collection of the churches of the Gentiles in Greece for the Christians at Jerusalem and St Paul is checking that his boast about the Corinthian church having been ready to make its contribution for over a year is in fact true. He does not want ‘egg on his face’, to use a common idiom, if this is not the case; so he reminds the church of the motives for giving and some guiding principles. He makes it clear that giving must be voluntary and not as an extortion. Each must give “as he has made up his mind”, cheerfully, “not under compulsion”. “Sow bountifully and reap bountifully; sparingly and you will reap sparingly.” God is able to provide us with every blessing in abundance and he enriches in many ways those who are generous.

In one of the gospel readings earlier in the week from St Luke’s sermon on the plain or in the flat place in chapter 6, giving is again the theme but here the emphasis is not on our friends but on our enemies as beneficiaries. Just as God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked we must not limit our kindness and mercy to our friends but direct it at those who are against us.

In these days of chat rooms, Facebook, Meta, X and Instagram to name but a few, it is remarkable how much vilification and abuse appears on the internet in the form of hate mail. The companies who post the sites have been pressed by the government and the public for some time to remove from their sites anything that is of an extremely offensive or repugnant nature. It really ‘beggars belief’ how hateful people can be with their messages, (usually sent anonymously of course), threatening all kinds of actions against people in the public eye. A few years ago, we witnessed the brutal murder of Jo Cox, a labour MP, in a public place and a similar assassination of David Amess a Conservative MP in Southend, who had dutifully served his constituency for 38 years. A man walks up to them and in both cases violently stabs them to death despite their lengthy service in the EU and/or Parliament and contributions to political life and especially to the needs of their constituents. The words of Christ spring to mind immediately, “They hated me without a cause”. And who could have known more intensely and personally the power of hatred towards one who had striven all his life to bring healing, enlightenment and salvation to the people of the world. Yet Christ bids us, or rather commands us, to love those who hate us and not to judge or condemn but rather to forgive. And then there is another reason to love our enemies if we, in our human weakness, cannot find the strength and the will to do this. There is an illuminating saying in the life of Mahatma Ghandi that “when you point a finger in blame at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back at yourself”. Attacking others, comparing, criticising and condemning ultimately has the greatest effect on us not those at whom we direct our words. It somehow constricts our freedom, our peace by taking control of our emotions and damaging us not those at whom we direct our attacks by making us victims of our passions, anger, jealousy, envy, hatred and the like. So Christ’s commandment to forgive is based very much on concern for us as people and lifting us above the well laid trap of what psychologists call the ‘addictive personality’. Not to forgive is a form of self-abuse.

In the parable of the Sower which we have just heard there is a description of four possible ways in which we can respond to the call of Christ to follow him. The first example offered by the Lord is summed up with the phrase “the devil comes and takes away the word (the seed) from their hearts that they may not believe and be saved”. In some parts of scripture, it is lamented that people will not hear the Word unless they have someone to preach good news to them. “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news,” is St Paul’s words quoting the prophet Isaiah. But in the same letter to the Romans it is implied that God manifests himself in some way to all people and not just in the physical creation but in a deeper way. But somebody or something is acting to take away the Word.

In the second case in the parable where the seed springs up suddenly but soon dies, we do not have the maturity, the character, the love to resist temptation and our first joy gives way to despair and lack of faith. Now this particular temptation is important for us to recognise. As part of our spiritual journey, there will come a time when God will deliberately withdraw from us. It is a well attested experience in the lives of the saints and especially in that of the founder of monasticism. When St Antony the Great had exhausted all his human and spiritual resources and was close to death after his terrible temptations, only then did Christ appear to him.

The seed which fell amongst thorns returns us to the world of materialism and selfishness and how we react to the temptations to reduce life to the sole purpose of ‘acquiring’, whatever that may be: power, money, people, property. There is a constant battle going on inside us between the spiritual and the material and we have to take that struggle seriously through constant prayer and fasting as far as we are able, to restore that peace to our souls which comes from constantly returning to God. St Seraphim of Sarov speaks about rekindling that warmth which God’s presence brings to our souls where He wishes to dwell. Brother Lawrence, a French medieval monk, calls it ‘practising the presence of God’. Christ describes this fourth state with these words. “They are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.” May the Lord give us that perseverance and faith, born of love for him, to serve through good times and bad and to continue steadfastly along the path He has in his wisdom laid out for each of us.

 ***12th October 2025, Oxford***

No doubt you have been following this week the trial of the nominee of the US President for judge of the Supreme Court. There was an interesting interview on BBC after the proceedings at the court with a woman in her late forties who had been forcibly raped at a college party in a similar way after too much alcohol. The experience had had a traumatic effect on her which impacted severely on her over 30 years. Suddenly, she decided that she could stand it no more and would write to the perpetrator and tell him what had happened to her and how she felt. She got his address from the college alumni records and wrote to him about what he had done to her. Two days later she got a call from the rapist who honestly confessed that he had no idea what had happened at the party and that he was really sorry. He could not express his profound regret and remorse for what had happened and the pain which he had caused her. His grief was palpable from his words and his overwhelming sense of sorrow at what had happened. After profuse and lengthy apologies, the lady tried to examine her feelings and realising that he was telling the truth she was lost for words. Then after a while she felt a terrible weight lift from her and a freedom to act, to make choices, to enjoy life as she had never done since the incident. She had forgiven him.

Christ speaks of this gift of forgiveness as a reciprocation for the wrongs we have committed and for which we receive forgiveness. It is at the heart of the prayer which he left us to say regularly. Thirty years is a long time for a person to carry such a weight but it is a desire to live which is the key to releasing ourselves from such a terrible burden and to healing, Forgiveness of others and giving to others is the mechanism which the Lord offers to use to love others and ourselves and the world which in his grace he has made for us to enjoy. To withhold forgiveness is to miss all these good things.

***Oxford 30th September 2018***