

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity Evensong

2 Corinthians 9

They say, don't they, that nothing has so much shaped the vocabulary of the English language and, more particularly its phrases and maxims, than the combination of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. I remember doing Hamlet at school and being amazed as we read round it in class, like you do, to find all these every day phrases cropping up – the lady doth protest too much, methinks; and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune; and all that. And then you read something like the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament and you come across phrases like “the fly in the ointment.” And then tonight, in the New Testament lesson we get that oft-quoted proverb “God loves a cheerful giver.”

And it couldn't come at a more appropriate time in the corporate life of Bridlington Priory. Because at its last meeting, before the summer break, the church council

– the PCC - began to get its head round giving to charity in a systematic way. The Priory is an enormously generous church. It makes its facilities freely available to community groups without making any charge in a way that most churches would never dream of. The notional value of the resource the Priory freely makes available to the community must run into thousands and thousands of pounds every year. And of course, the church council respond generously to appeals for donations. But, rather surprisingly, this is the only church I've ever been involved in, either since ordination or in my life before ordination, that doesn't have a systematic way of earmarking a certain proportion of its income to be used for charitable giving.

Once you start discussing narrow, technical questions like this, though, it's amazing what big, fundamental, theological issues are opened up: things like, you know, why we go to church, what the church is for, and the relationship between individual identity and the

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incorporation of the believer into the body of Christ. Does the church have the right to spend money on things individual donors might not like? Do individuals have the right to control all the money they have the privilege of receiving?

I must say that the discussion we had in the church council and subsequent conversations have been some of the most theologically informed and stimulating discussions I've had in church life. And one thing is for sure: that whatever the outcome of our discussions, we will have benefitted from the process that leads to it.

What is equally sure is that neither 2 Corinthians 9, nor any other particular passage in the Bible, gives a knock-down formula that provides The Answer. What it does show, though, is that Christians have always had to grapple with a call to make corporate giving. In our grappling we are in good company; and the process of grappling diligently is part of what Christian

discipleship is all about. It's also true that it's clear there have obviously always been arguments against corporate giving; and it's taken a good deal of rhetorical dexterity on the part of the leader to get their own way. Nevertheless, the principle of corporate giving is established; the council is right to be addressing it; and it's important that the wider congregations within the Priory are aware of these conversations, contribute to them and enable the council to come to an informed conclusion after the annual meeting next April.

I'll tell you what, though, this passage is about more than giving: it's about the whole question of Christian attitudes to wealth. A couple of verses in this passage are actually one of the proof texts used to justify the remarkable American phenomenon of the prosperity gospel – the idea that an evangelistic incentive to become a Christian is that God makes Christians rich: the more Christian you are, the richer you get; and the richer you are, the better Christian you must be. And

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that must be true because 2 Corinthians 9: 10 says “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness.” Well, of course it’s nonsense; and if the Bible does ever suggest that people’s wealth is a blessing from God, it’s only so that they can exercise responsibility for that wealth in a righteous way. And there’s far more in the Bible to suggest that far too often wealth is a stumbling block to spiritual integrity. It does make you wonder, though, whether the typically ascetic English Christian attitude to wealth should be reconsidered.

We’ve just come back from a couple of weeks in a cottage in the south of France. And the quote of the holiday I’m not going to be allowed to live down is when I declaimed “I’m come to France to read, eat cheese and drink wine.” Apparently my mistake was not to put spending time with my adorable wife high enough up that list; and I have the scars to prove it. but my point was that when you go by ferry and not

plane you have the opportunity to get stuck into bigger and denser books than you might be able to cope with in routine life. And one of the books I’ve been itching to read is Hugo Young’s life of Margaret Thatcher. In that there’s quite a sustained reflection on Thatcher’s relationship and affinity with people who are Jewish. The suggestion is that in Jewish ethics there is an absence of material guilt which is music to Thatcherite ears.

So often Christians, in England, experience discomfort with the trappings of wealth and with engagement with wealth creation. It’s felt that an attitude of piety is necessarily austere. Certainly Margaret Thatcher had an austere upbringing; not because her father, a well-to-do tradesman couldn’t afford comfort; but because his non-conformist piety made him believe being virtuous meant being austere. Well, she shook that off! And the Thatcher years were an unashamed celebration of conspicuous affluence, for those who could get it.

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When the Church of England, in its finest hour, published its report Faith in the City in defence of those who were excluded from Thatcherite affluence most of the response was Tory MPs spluttering because they'd not noticed before that bishops were Krypto-Marxists. But the most sustained theological criticism of the report, which was lent in Margaret Thatcher's aid, came from the Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, who reckoned that Christians overlook the responsibility to create wealth and be responsible for yourself.

Margaret Thatcher famously told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland – but apparently she first made the remark as early as 1968 to a conference of conservative women – that the most important point about the parable of the Good Samaritan is that the Samaritan could afford to be generous.

That of course is the rub: it's what we do with our money that important. And it takes great powers of spiritual discernment to ensure that we discharge that responsibility faithfully.

Amen.