

STEWARDSHIP SERMON AT WS ON 25-02-24 (based on Lev.27:30-33, Mark 10; 17-31; Acts - various)

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

SHARING

In this, the second of our three stewardship-themed services, I shall focus on a particular aspect of stewardship: the responsible and altruistic management of an inheritance or gift entrusted into our care. This morning we have heard three readings: one about tithes, one about giving up the status of wealth and joining a new community, and a third about sharing possessions. How might we interpret and apply them today, in particular to the needs of our own communities? And a spoiler alert - I shan't be taking them literally!

The reading from Leviticus is about giving a 10th of one's plant and animal produce to God. On the assumption that God isn't in literal need of these things, it could mean sharing with others except that in this reading it doesn't. There were three categories of tithes: that of the feasts, which was initiated by the religious community for its members; the tithe for the destitute, a community project to which everyone had to contribute; and the Levitical tithe described in our reading. This one was viewed as a sacred act, whereby tithes were given to the Levites as a sacrifice to the Lord. It is the form of tithing that makes least sense to us today. So, because the tithed items, ie plants and animals, were created by God, I looked to a creative interpretation! We are, after all, stewards of this wonderful world, and entrusted to look after it - though sadly, we're not making too great a job of it. Viewing the passage from an agricultural perspective, I could see the tithes representing the increased amount we could get out of the land if we looked after it properly. Greater care ensures a greater yield, from which more people can be fed. Perhaps for our communities today, it's about making the most out of the assets we have, be they land, buildings or people and their skills - use it or lose it.

In Mark, we meet a man who turns away in grief because he feels he can't give up the status bestowed by his wealth in order to follow Jesus as his disciple. Christians today are disciples of Christ, but few give up everything, unless they choose to go into Holy Orders. What we have inherited through Christ is the love of a God who wants us to use it to the benefit of others. We are, if you like, stewards of his grace and mercy, and need to be worthy of them by putting them to good use. In practical terms, that may mean sharing

our possessions, or our time, or our talents. We have a duty to God to share what he has given us. The passage is about giving up absolutely everything, but as we know, the Bible is rich in examples of hyperbole. I see a practical point being made here about how we measure happiness in terms of wealth, turning our lives inwards to focus on our own needs rather than those of others. The chap approaching Jesus is clearly good at sticking to the letter of the Law, but fears that it is not sufficient to earn him eternal life. His focus is very much on himself, on what he lacks, and what he needs to do to ensure that he will get through the eye of the needle into God's Kingdom. And therein lies the irony - he lacks for nothing, other than the generosity needed to share what he has with the poor. The passage ends by effectively saying - greatly simplified and paraphrased - one gains more by giving than one loses.

The book of Acts tells of the founding of the Christian church and the spread of its message to the Roman Empire - very much an act of sharing by way of both word and deed. The Christian church was and is primarily a community of people with a shared faith. But we heard in the reading of personal possessions also being shared, "so that there would be no needy persons among them". This is the church reaching out to the rest of the community, so that instead of consisting of a series of lonely islands, it becomes a stronger whole. And the glue binding that community? A shared appreciation that the sum of the whole is indeed greater than its individual parts. Sharing is the key to its thriving - maybe through acts of kindness, social events (perhaps a modern version of the tithe of feasts?), and bringing people together in both their joy and their grief, in celebration and in remembering. Perhaps you can see where I'm going with this.... for these are the very things our churches offer to believers and non-believers alike.

Let's return to the definition I used of stewardship as the responsible and altruistic management of something entrusted into our care. Our village churches have been effectively inherited by those fortunate enough to still have one. They are part of village history and there are few who would be unmoved by their closure. They have seen family members baptised, married and mourned. They offer a quiet space for contemplation and prayer, and a welcoming space for meetings and events. Historically, they were built by landowners who also provided land for graveyards and somewhere for the priest to live. So the Church as an institution did not originally found church buildings and parishes, but its later leaders adopted the parish system, and in

doing so, laid most of the duty of maintenance on the parishioners, which remains the case today.

However, as our lovely old churches slowly age and need to be adapted so that they can be shared more widely, the responsibility for upkeep, if left to just a few, may become untenable. It needs to be shared more equitably. As I said earlier, church is not a building, but a community bound by faith. What the buildings help to provide is a space to share with others in the community, without prejudice. Do we care sufficiently to keep that legacy going as an asset for future generations? If we do, how can we help? And how might we inspire others?

It is worth noting, though, that Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians said: "The gift is acceptable according to what one has, not what one does not have". I shall say no more.

In the name of Christ, amen.