

# Our Church | Our Challenges | Our Choices



A sermon delivered by Rev'd Richard Sewell at St Mary's Barnes to highlight the financial situation facing St Mary's in the next year

September 2015



A man was flying from Heathrow and found he had time for a coffee before he had to go to the Gate. He picked up a coffee and decided to treat himself to a bag of mini doughnuts too. He had to share a table so he put down his coffee and all his hand luggage. He started reading his book, sipped his coffee and took his first doughnut. To his surprise the man he was sharing the table with reached into the bag and took a doughnut too. But he decided to shrug it off and thought nothing of it. But when he took another doughnut, the other man helped himself again. And so it went on. Then the other man checked his watch, gathered up his things but before leaving, he took one last doughnut and smiled. Well, he was so shocked he couldn't bring himself to say anything. What a cheek! By then it was time for him to leave too and so he finished his coffee and turned to pick up his hand luggage and only then did he notice a full bag of doughnuts right on top of his case! Do we approach giving from a position of saying '*why is he taking so much from me*' or '*I've got more than I need so it's good to share it*'?

There's a lot of attention at the moment on charities taking advantage of vulnerable people and pestering them to give more than they can afford and also feeling stressed out because they feel bad when they don't give to a good cause. I do not intend to do that, but if people can feel bad because someone tells them '*this is a very good cause*

*and you should help to relieve suffering', it's even worse if you tell them 'and God expects you to do this'!*

This is not going to be about making you feel guilty but simply to say in an honest and straightforward way – *'this is the situation and we need everyone to support it as best they can'*.

The leaflet you have received explains the situation perfectly well – we are a busy church, doing a lot and trying to make an impact in our community by serving it and shaping it. We are also supporting other churches in our diocese to fulfil their calling too. I guess if you are here today and you make a commitment to come as often as possible then there is something about all of this that's very important to you; hopefully more important than the coffee shop that you like to go to. But of course there's no entrance charge for coming to church. So it's all voluntary and maybe for that reason money might seem less important.

It's said that there's no such thing as a free lunch but when you get something and no one tells how much you have to pay then I guess then it can feel free. The plate going round may feel like it's purely optional or that it doesn't matter how much you put in so long as you give something – anything even. In fact I'd much rather we didn't have to pass around a plate at all. Some churches have been able to abolish the plate because the regular committed members of the church give enough by standing order not to have to bother with that ritual. To be very honest it's a shame to have to ask visitors to pay for the running of our church when it is actually our responsibility to do that.

A pragmatic and practical approach to our church finances would simply be to say that it currently costs £280 000 a year to run St Mary's so could everyone please work out their fair share of that and pay up! But you still wouldn't know what your fair share is. A Christian approach to church finance looks to delve a bit deeper than simply expenditure and income. We are a community rooted in faith in God – this is no hobby or special interest. We are here because we believe that the business of this church – its worship, its service to the community, its nurture of faith for young and old alike is a matter of deep and great significance. So our approach to giving should not be **casual**: just put in the plate whatever happens to be in your pocket or purse when the plate comes round. It shouldn't be **random**: only pay anything on the Sundays when you come to church, because the costs are day in and day out so giving should be regular and committed.

Christian giving starts with the acknowledgment that God is generous and is the very source of all our lives. All that we give should arise out of that profound sense of gratitude to God for everything we have received. In fact Christian giving is even more radical than that. We repeat a challenging phrase every week in our liturgy and I wonder if we really notice what it is we are saying:

*"Yours Lord is the greatness the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty. All things come from you and of your own do we give you".*

## **All things come from you and of your own do we give you.**

It's a remarkable statement and we say it together week in, week out just after the plate has gone round and everything is gathered up and brought up for a blessing. What we are really saying is: all of this isn't even our own cash we are giving since we only give it because you gave it to us first. Of course you might reply: "well, I say that but actually I know I worked hard, I earned the money so what I do it with is up to me entirely". I can't argue with that as a superficial truth. But the deeper truth (and everything we are about here when we gather for worship is trying to see the deeper truth) is that God is the source, the origin of everything. What we have is what God has given and God has given more than we deserve. I suspect if we think that God has been pretty stingy and when he handed out the blessings that he seemed to have passed us that you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. I reckon that if we think that everything we've got we earned by sheer hard graft and God's benevolence played no part in whatsoever, that we probably wouldn't be here in the first place. It's much more likely to be true that we are here because we do feel a powerful sense of gratitude to God for the blessings that we receive. Even when life is a struggle and things aren't going the way we would wish; even when we have to work quite hard to count our blessings on more than the fingers of one hand we are still quite likely to want to say that God has been good to us and we owe all we have to God.

So Christian stewardship – which simply means taking good care of what God has entrusted to us – causes us to consider how our giving to God's work can reflect that sense of generosity for what God has done for us. In fact the diocese (the bigger structure of the church of which we are part) has made a bit of a change to the way that it asks all the 340 churches in the diocese to think about its giving. We used to submit all our income data to them and then by a complex calculation they would tell us what we should pay so that every church was assessed fairly. Now they have asked us to consider what a generous response from us would be in the light of God's blessings to us. The whole diocese is founded on this generosity based system. We are invited to do corporately what churches are inviting the congregational members to do as individuals – to look at everything we have been blessed with and to make a generous response.

## **All things come from you and of your own do we give you**

But you might still want to know: in the context of this church what would a generous response look like? Of course to some degree it's got to relate to your income. What a person dependent on their state pension can give now will be different to what a person at the height of their career can give. Some might say that they have multiple financial commitments to fulfil and that can't be denied. But to some degree we have choices about what we spend our money on. A generous response truly reflecting God's goodness to us would not only seek to give what's left over after every other expense has been made. A generous response should reflect the importance we attach to church and the value we give to its mission and ministry.

Last week Paul and Patty, our churchwardens, gave a clear and challenging message about the financial needs of our church. They said that if things carry on as they are then a deficit will turn into something more serious. Whilst we need to do something about it now, it's well within our grasp to get back on track but it needs 50 individuals or couples to increase their giving by £25 per month. Some already give substantially more than this and others would feel that is beyond their reach. Each must decide what a generous response is for them and we would like everyone to think if they can be one of those to respond to this challenge and be part of the solution to the problem that is before us. By far the best way to give to St Mary's is by monthly standing order. This means that your gift comes to the church even on the Sundays when you are busy elsewhere and helps us to plan our expenditure throughout the year. It's also tax efficient. The envelopes are ideal for visitors or very irregular attenders but they must be filled out fully in pen. Money put into the envelope without a name and address is just a waste of an envelope. But some of you like to use the envelopes as a symbol of your giving in the context of worship. And that's fine. But you could always do a standing order for a set amount and then add a few pounds more in the envelope every time you come to church. All the paperwork for a banker's order and gift aid is available and I urge you to do it today, while you remember.

A very important thing about Christian stewardship is that it is not just about the financial support that is given to the church but about the practical ways everyone can support the life of this church. A few of us are paid for our church work but the vast majority of work is done by volunteers and we simply would not survive without people doing the jobs – making the coffee, leading our children's groups, looking after the church yard garden etc etc. If you could offer some time or some more time do please let any of the clergy or PCC know. And today every PCC member is wearing a badge so that if you have questions about what I've said today or the financial situation of our church, you can question them after church over coffee. They are ready, poised to answer your questions and to help you make your contribution.

Sorry if you have had to sit through two sermons about money and what you can you do, but the situation we face is too serious to underplay. We are blessed with a wonderful church with fine music and outstanding preaching week in week out. We are here to serve our community and we hope and pray that all we do speaks of God's love for every single person and demonstrates Christ's love in practical ways. We are all privileged to be able to be part of God's purpose in the world to bring hope, care and forgiveness. It would be tragic if we had to scale back this work because of lack of funds. I hope you will be one of those who makes the choice to respond positively to this challenge so that we can fulfil our call to be God's church. Amen.



Rector of St Mary's Barnes