**Sermon at St Mary’s Barnes by Geoffrey Barnett**

**Pentecost Sunday 9th June 2019**

All that we have been marking and celebrating since Christmas, the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus the man, culminates in today’s outpouring of the Holy Spirit in that dramatic story we have heard (Acts 2.1-21). It is the fulfilment of that promise of Jesus, which we’ve also heard (John 14.17, 26). That promise of the spirit of truth that is to teach us everything and remind us of all that Jesus has said to us.

And so, it’s timely to be looking forward today to how we give effect in our personal and parish lives to the commission we have received as Christians in this place. In the apostle Paul’s words, ‘if we live by the Spirit, let us be guided by the Spirit’ (Galatians 5.25).

I’m not going to go on for too long because our churchwardens need time at the end of the service to tell you about our specific plans.

My purpose is briefly to review biblical teaching about financial giving.

It all begins in the book of Genesis when the priest of God most high, Melchizedek of Salem, blesses Abraham, whose response is to give him, as we’re told, ‘one tenth of everything’(Gen 14.20). Of course, what that meant was a one tenth share of all the goods that Abraham and his troops had brought back from their mission to rescue his nephew, Lot.

Then Jacob too, after the Lord had stood beside him in a dream and blessed him and all his descendants (Gen 28.12-15), promised to give back to the Lord one tenth of all he received (v22).

And so, a commitment to tithing (offering a one tenth share) entered the Mosaic law and is firmly set out in the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It is a practice which stands in Jewish religious law to this day.

Before I leave the Old Testament, there is a wise saying of Solomon to be found in the book of Proverbs (11.24,25): ‘Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water’.

The teaching of the New Testament is to be found mainly in the words of the apostle Paul. But let’s not overlook Jesus insisting in one of his conversations with the Pharisees that it’s all very well to tithe our material gifts – yes, that’s important – but, more important than that, is not to neglect ‘justice and the love of God’(Luke 11.42). None of us would want to argue otherwise. Love of God and our neighbour are commands above all others.

And let’s not also overlook that those very first groups of Christians that are described at the beginning of the book of Acts ‘had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need’(Acts 2.44,45). A true co-operative.

But it’s Paul who offers practical and focussed advice, because he organised what appears to have been a very significant collection for the Lord’s people in Jerusalem from many of the communities he had helped to found. And his advice was gentle and measured. Observe some discipline in your giving; plan it carefully; and ‘give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver’ (2 Cor 9.7).

So where does all this leave us 2,000 years on?

It was Christian Councils across Europe in the sixth century that articulated the application of the tradition of financial tithing to early medieval Christian communities. And so, the idea has persisted across different traditions down the ages. For some time now the Church of England has identified a 5% share of income after tax and mortgage payments as offering us a benchmark for our thinking. But, in reality, if we were all to give, say, 3%, St Mary’s would easily meet its financial needs. However, it’s not a matter of slavish calculation; it’s a matter of cheerful giving in the context of our own financial priorities.