

# A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

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The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost



23 September 2018

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Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalm 54

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

Well, it is coming to that time of year that we start to think about Stewardship. This brings to mind a story which some of you have heard before, but it bears repeating in this context I think.

A local Scottish charity had never received a donation from a very successful actor, so the director of the charity made a phone call. "Sir, our research shows that you £500,000 a year, yet you don't appear to have given a penny to charity" the director began. "Wouldn't you like to help the community?" The wealthy actor replied, "Did your research show that my mother is ill, with extremely expensive medical bills?" "Um, no," mumbled the director. "Or that my brother is blind and unemployed? Or that my sister's husband died, leaving her broke with four kids?" "I ... I ... I'm so sorry. I had no idea." "So," came the reply, "if I didn't give any money to them, why on earth would I give any to you?"

In the month of October each year, we are invited to take stock of where God and the Church sit in within the many demands and priorities that make up the activity of our lives. So, as we approach the end of September, you will be receiving a letter from me and the Senior Warden to launch this year's Stewardship campaign. This coming year is an important one. It is the year that we launch into our third century of life and witness. This fall will determine how, and in what shape, we do that. It is a time of year that begs a number of questions. Perhaps the most important is, "What does God want from me?"

When I was very young I made a clay egg cup at school. It was the roughest little thing, but it was glazed and had purple spots on it, and I gave it to my Father for his birthday. It was not the prettiest thing nor the most functional, but my Father said he liked it and that he would use it. And he did. I can still remember him struggling uncomplaining every morning for many, many weeks to make his boiled egg fit into the hole that was uneven and not quite big enough, and then to hold on to it to stop it falling over as he ate the egg. He never failed to say how much he loved the egg cup, and how great it was.

I think that God desires what we have to give in this way. If we take our prayers for instance. God doesn't need our prayers. He doesn't need anything from us at all for himself. No more than a parent actually needs anything from their child. Yet I am certain that God loves our prayers in the way my Dad loved that crooked piece of clay. God loves our prayers because, however weak and pathetic they may often be, they are from us, his children and he has high hopes for us. He hopes that we will become people to whom he can entrust parts of his kingdom and his great purpose for the world. We are not to be children forever, but to become his priests whose prayers on behalf of the world will become its greatest hope.

He also chooses to use our prayers. Not because they are great, but because, even all the heavenly host, whose immaculate prayers are pure and shining extensions of his will, do not, in his eyes, matter as much as the halting and half-hearted efforts of his children to whom he has given freedom to pray or not to pray as we wish. Amazing as it may seem, he would rather labor with what we give him, day in and day out, like my Dad with the impractical clay egg cup, because he only wants his kingdom to come to be through us and with us. He could build a perfect Kingdom tomorrow, but it would not be the Kingdom he wants, because the Kingdom he wants is one that is ours as well as his.

Like any parent, God wants to encourage us and teach us that what we make, what we do, are the means by which we can affect the world and can help him build his kingdom. Like any parent, he wants us, above all, to take responsibility for our lives and the world. He makes much of our misshapen egg cups in-order to show us that his hopes for us go far beyond what we are to what we can become and what he created us to be.

“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.”

Today’s Collect also points us to that same question, “What does God expect of us in this life? What does he want us to be and do? What are those heavenly things that we are to reach out for in our limited time here on this earth?”

Well, what does any parent expect of their child? I suppose those of us lucky enough to have children would probably say we want them to grow up to have good and loving hearts, to live brave and good lives, and to become faithful, responsible and honorable men or women who will stand up tall and make a difference for the good.

Of course, we also want them to have a decent means of existence too. To be able to live in a good place, to have a good job, to be educated and to make their way positively in the world.

In truth though, we care more that they find the most precious things in life, the heavenly things. To find love, to find a purpose that moves them, a spirit of adventure that makes them able to grow through challenges and, of course, a faith that makes them strong and good people who take that responsibility, and that makes that difference.

How do you know that these heavenly things are in someone’s heart and soul? How do we know that we have become what our parents and our Heavenly Father want us to be? Jesus said, “By their fruits, ye shall know them.” James also picks up that theme in his letter, including today’s reading, “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom”. “Show by your good life.”

There are three important things that come out of a person; words, deeds and attitude. Only when we can see all three are present, and in accord with each other, do we really believe in that person. What someone says is one thing, but it doesn't accord with what they do, and with their attitude towards people, and the world, we remain unconvinced. As we say thank you to a truly extraordinary servant of this Church today in Glenn Metzdorf, we recognize that our great respect for him comes from the obvious fact that his quiet dedicated actions demonstrated his faith and commitment in a way that all of us could see with our own eyes every day.

So, as we consider Stewardship this year, we do so asking what it is that God wants from us. The measure of us as people is reflected in the fruits of our lives. It is seen in what we say and in what we do. It is seen in just how we use our most precious things; our time, talents and money.

Money is only a part of the bigger picture but it is an essential part. Money, in the world today, is really just a universal unit of power, isn't it? It is simply what we are able to do, what we can affect, how we exercise our will.

I had never received an Annual Credit Card statement like the one I received towards the end of last year. It was a real eye-opener. The statement divided my spending up into categories; how much on eating out, on supermarket shopping, holidays and a whole series of other categories. Wow! It really made me think. Did we really spend more on this than that!

How much you spend on what shows pretty unequivocally what matters to you most.

I was told by someone the other day that their attitude to Christian giving was deeply affected by something my predecessor once said. He stood there and said "God comes first. All sorts of demands are placed on us, but God has to come first for a Christian". Before the Taxman, before everything, we should set aside what we can for God. Of course, there are some huge demands on us that we cannot avoid. Children's education, mortgages, tax, food, shelter, clothing. As Jesus says, "Your heavenly Father knows you need all these things, but seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you".

What we say is important, yes. We confess the Christian faith each week in the Creed. That is the statement of who we are, and what we believe at the deepest level. But what we do, what we spend our time, talents and money on, shows what we really believe.

This Stewardship campaign I would simply ask that we all prayerfully examine what the evidence is, in terms of what we give of ourselves, that what we say each Sunday is true?

Forgive me now for being frank. There are many Godly uses of our money of course, but this year, Christ Church really does need our commitment. Why? Well, three reasons.

First, we have some substantial debt from legacy commitments made before I came to be Rector here. Those commitments were undertaken for very noble, sensible and good reasons, but they leave us with something that needs to be dealt with.

Secondly, Christ Church is thought of as a wealthy Church and we are, but our number of pledges has slipped substantially over the last 5 or 6 years.

Thirdly, we have the second lowest average pledge amount among our peers, in terms of Churches in the Diocese. That is surprising, and not great.

Now many of you give most generously I know, and many of you responded magnificently to the Stewardship Campaign last year. Thank you! Two very generous one-off donations enabled us to get to where we got to in last year's campaign. But without them, we would not be where are.

This year, Christ Church really needs those of you that don't currently pledge to pledge, and those that can do so, to raise Christ Church to nearer the top of your list of good causes that you support.

I wouldn't blame anyone for thinking that Christ Church doesn't really need our money, we don't look like we do. There will be champagne and catering after church today, but I would just say that these are a gift from people who love Glenn and the money isn't coming out of Church Funds.

It is also true that we have a large endowment, but we draw on that endowment every year, and without that draw, we would be unable do 25% of what we do. That's how much we rely on the giving of people from the past.

The reality is that this year, the Church really does need your attention if it doesn't have it already. If we are going to continue to support you in your faith, to support the many good causes we support as a congregation, if we are going to continue to be the beating heart of so much good that Christ Church does through its people across so many good works in the community and beyond, then all of us have to think carefully about those little pots of clay we once gave to our parents when we were children, and we need to reflect on what we are capable of making an offering to God today with the clay that now rests in our hands to use. Offerings that say who we are and what we believe in, and offerings that Christ can take and use, just as he took the loaves and the fishes, to amazing effect. With your help, Christ Church can move into our third century with confidence and faith. God can use what we give, to the extent that we give.

Amen.



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