

The Launch of the Vision for Giving by Rev Allister Lane

13th October 2013

Luke 19:1-10 **Romans 12:1-6a**

In a sense the whole Gospel message can be summed up in this well known verse: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3:16). John 3:16 is often used to express the wonderful and amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is a verse potent with meaning – about God's motivations, methods and purposes.

A key word I want to highlight is the verb *gave*.
God *gave* his only Son.

This signals clearly to us an important understanding of God's nature and activity.
God is a *giver*.

And whilst giving starts from God, the giving is not just in one direction. When God gave his only Son, a rich and abundant economy of giving explodes – a rich and abundant flow of giving based on new relationships made possible through Jesus Christ. We are enabled to have new relationship with God and with one another, characterised not by self-interest but by gracious giving and receiving.

Every Sunday here at St John's, as come to the part of the worship service to make our Offering to God, we announce "We give as Jesus gives."
Why do we say that?
What does it mean? "We give as Jesus gives."...?

Is it an imperative based on obeying an example given to us by Jesus?
Well that is part of it for sure, but much more importantly, it expresses the Christian conviction that Jesus has opened up a new reality; a new way of living.
By becoming a human and restoring us into relationship with God;
by enabling us to participate in the very life of God in the power of the Holy Spirit,
Jesus enables us to participate in God's economy of gracious giving and receiving.

Jesus gives us what we need to be part of a 'continuous flow' of giving and receiving.

It's much more than following Jesus' example or obeying his instructions.
And it's even more than receiving eternal life when we die.
By "giving as Jesus gives" we participate in a life of grace; of fullness; of abundance – whereby everyday acts are no longer calculated by fulfilment of religious obligations, or even immediate rewards and benefits – but by eternal purposes; kingdom purposes which

uncover God's wondrous plans including the fullness of life God desires for us, and all people.

In giving himself, Jesus reveals the overflowing love given from God's very being. The gracious love of God is not self-serving but is revealed in Jesus Christ as the pouring out for the sake of others – flooding us with grace and identifying us as *receivers*. The love that overflows from God flows into our lives.

Miroslav Volf asks

“What happens to the flow when it reaches us? Does it then stop, having bestowed the gift and fulfilled its purpose? If the flow were to stop, we would be only receivers, not givers. We would then be unlike what is most divine in God. God would be a pure giver, and we would be no givers at all; we would receive from God, but instead of giving, we would only acquire through legitimate exchange or take by force. But we were created to be and to act like God. And so the flow of God's gifts shouldn't stop as soon as it reaches us. The outbound movement must continue. Indeed, in addition to making us flourish, giving is the very purpose for which God gave us the gifts.”¹

And so a crucial observation for a *theology of giving* is that **we need to give**.

When the source and purpose of giving is understood, we are swept up in the flow; compelled to participate; to give as Jesus gives.

“We are not simply the final destinations in the flow of God's gifts. Rather, we find ourselves midstream, so to speak. The gifts flow into us, and they flow on from us. From Christ, gifts flow to us, each one of us; from us, they flow to [others]. ... We are simultaneously receivers and givers. We receive from Christ, and we give to and receive from each other.”²

Christ reveals God is the source of gifts and shows our need to give. Our giving becomes joined to his, as his living presence moves us.

The Apostle Paul put it this way “*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*” (Galatians 2:19-20)

Recognition of our participation in the life of God begins as *worship*.

Worship understood as not simply bowing and scraping to appease a distant and aloof deity, but true worship where we give and receive.

Worship in the life and power of the presence of Christ, where we are enabled to give – give with joy.

Celebrating God's giving to us is in essence what faith is: trusting and accepting who God is and what God is doing for us.

And such faith elicits a response of *gratitude*. Our gratitude is a sign of the honour we have for God. We recognise God as giver, and implicitly recognise ourselves as recipients.

¹ *Free of Charge*, Volf p49.

² *Ibid.* p50.

Surely this is the revelation that came to Zacchaeus. He suddenly identified himself as a recipient of God's grace in Christ, and instantly made a grateful and joyful response – to give to others. And what was Jesus' response?

Jesus said to him "Today salvation has come to this house"

In his *giving* Zacchaeus expressed he had a new way of *living*.

God's *motivation for giving* (as already mentioned) is the outpouring of love.

God's *purpose for giving* is for the flourishing of love; for genuine relationships, trust, and availability. Both between God and us and one other.

Worship expresses all of this:

God as the giver,

our receptivity,

our gratitude,

our willingness to be part of God's purposes,

God being available to us and our being available to God.

In the reading from Romans Paul said "*therefore*, ... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Rom 12:1).

The 'therefore' indicates that 'as we have received' *therefore* 'offer this sacrifice of worship'.

This worship is a *living* sacrifice. In other words, our worship is our *whole lives*, how we live, the decisions we make to do things or not do things – including our own giving.

With gratitude we are willingly participating with Jesus "We give as Jesus gives".

Francis of Assisi prayed "Make me an *instrument*..."

Giving as worship means we make ourselves available to God, to be part of God purposes.

Have you ever paused to consider why we make our Offering as part of our service of worship?

It's actually a peculiar action isn't it? Passing over very material, everyday items of money and food. But these are the most appropriate symbols we have to express how we understand our *giving as worship*.

If our giving was just about meeting the operational costs of an organisation, we'd probably do it differently. But we understand our giving as worship.

Although careful consideration of our giving at St John's was sparked by a forecast of prolonged budget shortfalls, the Session has been 'convicted' that *we need to give* – as a crucial aspect of our faith.

In this sense, **our need to give is more important than St John's need to receive**.

Indeed, if our giving is motivated merely by the needs of the church, then we may well hold back our giving. Especially if we make an assumption that St John's is a 'rich church' and so we don't need to give.

You can tell I'm not being entirely hypothetical! Many people have mentioned to me that the Capital Trust Fund St John's has influences how they give.

The Trust Fund has been a block for us, when we've assumed giving is about *need*.

When we recognise our *need to give*, and understand our *giving as worship*, we are freed to participate fully in the flow of gracious giving and receiving Jesus invites into.

We should be wary of settling for a 'transactional' attitude, rather than one of grace. We should be wary of connecting our giving too closely to the outcomes of activities in the life of the congregation, as this ultimately leads to *conditional* giving – based on a personal assessment of the management of the church budget.

Celebrating *giving as worship* ensures we joyfully participate in the flow of giving and receiving.

The life of any healthy congregation, the shared life of mission and ministry, assumes we are *participating* in what God is doing. It would be arrogantly presumptuous of us to think we are doing anything meaningful otherwise.

And if we believe we are participating in what God is doing, then is this something we can partially opt into?

As the old hymn says this “demands my soul, my life, my all.”³

The elders of St John's (and I include myself among them) genuinely believe God is leading us in what we are doing together as the mission and ministry we are called to participate in.

We cannot isolate off just one aspect of our life together (not just our finances). We hold everything we do as our call to participate with God.

What has emerged is this Vision for Giving – that is as expansive and as meaningful as our whole shared life of faith.

To put it another way...giving is crucial for genuine *discipleship* – to be the Church of Christ.

The Vision for Giving presents an opportunity for us to grow our faith, which currently underdeveloped.

Comparing our giving to that of other congregations like us highlights the potential we have to grow.

The average annual giving

of each member in Presbyterian churches across all New Zealand last year was \$612.

And the average giving in the Wellington Presbyterian churches was \$698.

By comparison we, at St John's gave an average of just \$337 each year.

So the goal has been set to double our giving as a congregation.

All members of Session have resolved to be personally committed to the goal and to increase their giving.

And this vision invites us all to prayerfully consider what we give and perhaps more importantly, *why* we give.

There are no prescribed levels of giving, because we each need to discern what God wants from us.

As recipients of grace, we want to be a place where we cultivate generous giving. Not giving that is transactional, but is transformational.

We have a goal of doubling our current giving – but (let me stress this) it is a **shared goal**.

That means we recognise that each of our circumstances is different.

Some of us will not be able to double our giving.

³ When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Some of us will be able to more than double our giving.
Some of us already give generously from what we have been given. We acknowledge such giving as recognition of the importance of giving for faith and discipleship.

What really matters is that every single one of us understands that giving is something God expects we will be part of; giving is living out our faith. And so although the widow in the temple gave very little in comparison to others, Jesus pointed her out, as an example of someone with great faith.

You'll notice that I've said very little about balancing the church budget. For this vision is about something much greater – it's about how to live fully as God wants us to. That's what church community is about; God calls us together to live the mission and ministry shared with us. And it's up to us to support each other in that. So will you commit to living this way and be part of growing our faith?

Giving is an act of faith.
We move from trusting in our own resources to entrusting ourselves to God's grace.
Hence we no longer live alone, for Christ lives in us.

This morning we want to give you a pack related to this Vision for Giving.
This pack has information about the Vision, including the practical mechanisms on how to go about giving at St John's.

We want each household to get a pack. And if you don't get one today they will also be available in the weeks to come.

Included in the pack is a pledge card that we ask you *carefully* and *prayerfully* complete as a sign of commitment to God. Only the Office Staff will see this, so confidentially will be maintained.

You are invited to place the completed pledge card in the Offering bag.
And you may want to complete it today, but we encourage you to take the time to discern your giving and return the card sometime in the next three weeks – placing it in the confidential envelope and into the Offering bag.

Today (and the next three weeks) there will be people in the foyer to help with any questions about the various giving mechanisms available.