

# PREACHING GENEROSITY

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE LECTIONARY READINGS

**As growing disciples, Vision 2026 commits us to give generously of our time, talents and money to the cause of Christ. But how can we encourage generosity in our church cultures?**

**The following reflections based on the lectionary readings are intended to help inspire you to consider how to inspire generosity in the liturgy of the Word, improving our understanding on money, stewardship, and giving.**

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**Sunday 10 September 2023. Trinity 14.  
Romans 13.8-end.**

### **Pay it forwards.**

Getting a loan is easy in the UK! Taking them out may be easy, but paying them back may less so. Average personal debt in the UK excluding mortgages now exceeds £33,000. Such debt can become impossible to repay and lead to a spiral down into real poverty.

That loans are so commonplace makes it hard to see Paul's teaching being taken literally today.

A Malayan proverb says "One can pay back the loan of gold, but one dies forever in debt to those who are kind." Society now encourages us to "pay it forwards". Recipients of kindness, especially where they are unable to bless the original giver, might bless others in response to the blessings we have been shown. The initial debt may be left unpaid, but it is redeemed by a subsequent act of grace and generosity.

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**17 September 2023. Trinity 15.  
Romans 14: 1-12 and Matthew 18: 21-35.**

### **Giving from the heart – without counting the cost.**

Geraldine was suddenly widowed at the age of 51, she had never worked and had no children. Geraldine turned to a Christian friend for advice who loaned her money to tide her over until things were settled with the administration of the estate, which took months to sort out. At a later point, realising she would have insufficient funds to settle her debt, Geraldine asked for more time to repay her. The friend took pity on her and told her she owed nothing, it was her way of helping her friend.

Geraldine's friend gave to her from her heart. This reflects the generosity we hear about in our readings today and something we can be mindful of in our dealings with others.

Such generosity is shown by God towards us. God believes in forgiving and in equality, we need do nothing but *be* and he loves us. He wants us to treat others as we would wish to be treated, upholding each another, being generous to one another, giving and not counting the cost. In doing this we reflect God's abundantly generous love for each of us.

*Sharran Ireland was Team Rector of four churches now retired with PTO in the Diocese of Canterbury.*

### **Sunday 24 September 2023. Trinity 16. Exodus 16.2-15.**

#### **'Just in time' or 'Just in case'?**

Efficient businesses follow the 'just in time' principle, developing trusted supply chains that deliver components just when needed, rather than cluttering up the factory with large amounts of stock just in case they run short. In Exodus 16 God is teaching the Israelites in the desert the 'just in time' principle – that God can be trusted to deliver just what they need at the right moment. On the eve of the sabbath twice as much manna was delivered as on the other days (v5). Likewise in Psalm 105 v41, God provided water from the rock just in time.

So often we live by a different principle, 'just in case'. We clutter our lives with possessions and seek to accumulate assets in the bank 'just in case' they might be needed. The problem is that this principle teaches us to rely on ourselves rather than on God and can be such a generosity-blocker, causing us to hold on to things we have rather than give them away to those whose need is greater.

How are we going to live this week? Generously, in the confidence that God will provide what we need just in time? Or selfishly, holding on to what we have, just in case?

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**Sunday 1 October 2023. Trinity 17 (Proper 21).  
Philippians 2: 1-13.**

**A generous gift of attending to and listening to others.**

Sometimes the generosity of God can seem overwhelming: how can we possibly come close? Our epistle reading today is a good example, with those wonderful words about Christ emptying himself to take on the form of a slave and becoming obedient to the point of death.

But Paul also gives us a clue about where we might start putting generosity into action when he says 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others'. This is not an incitement to nosiness, but at heart it speaks of the gift of listening to others, of seeing what concerns them, of taking an interest in their preoccupations. In other words, it is about being generous with our attention.

Paying attention to someone may seem like a relatively minor thing to do, but if we are generous with our attention in the name of the one who gave his all, then it becomes infinitely more precious, and who knows where it will lead?

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**Sunday 8 October 2023. Trinity 18.  
Matthew 21.33-end.**

**Tenants are stewards.**

Having lived in our own house for many years, three years ago we moved into a rented property. We became stewards of our landlord's house, and noticed a conflict between the aspirations we had for the place in which we were living, and what the owner might want for it. If the house was ours, we might have knocked a wall down, or changed the garden around.

Stewards care for that which is entrusted to them – doing the best they can for the ultimate owner. Being a good steward will lead us to suppress our own desires and wants, to focus on another's agenda. The church is a steward of God's mission to the world – he generously entrusts the worldwide church with it. As tenants in God's world, and entrusted with his mission, are we imposing our aspirations for the church, or seeking to fulfil God's calling?

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**Sunday 15 October 2023. Trinity 19.  
Matthew 22: 1-14**

### **Accepting God's generous invitation**

Our Gospel reading tells that those whom the Lord has especially called, refused to attend his celebration of life, but then others, who were the most unexpected people, were chosen to be given a place at God's table.

The story is an allegory of God's generous invitation to us to take part in the dramatic unfolding of salvation brought by his Son, an offer beyond price, and an offer that is open to us all.

Matthew's point is about generous invitation and blunt refusal. He reinforces the message that whatever our situation in life, God calls to us generously and we are called to respond with equal generosity, to come out of ourselves and into the new life of the kingdom - to make the choice to accept God's generosity. The real mystery is that many still refuse when our life here can be made a foretaste of eternity with God, if only we choose to listen to the voice of the One who loves us enough to call us and accept his generous invitation to live!

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**Sunday 22 October 2023. Trinity 20.  
Psalm 96.1-9**

**'Ascribe to the Lord the honour due to his name; bring offerings and come into his courts.' (Psalm 96v8).**

One of the highlights of my visits to churches in Africa is always the offertory. That is when the worship so often comes alive, with singing and dancing and shouts of joy. For the psalmist, as for my African friends, bringing offerings to God was clearly an integral part of worship, a way of ascribing to God the honour due to his name.

That being so, how come we are so shy in our own culture about taking offerings in church? Often in our embarrassment we hide the offertory in a hymn without any prior explanation, in a way that so easily catches the visitor unawares.

One sad legacy of Covid is that in many places we have lost even the offertory hymn. Online giving is in many ways better, safer and more reliable than giving on the plate. However we can lose that precious connection between giving and worship. What we give, through the bank or on the plate, is one of the ways in which we ascribe to the Lord the honour we think is due to his name.

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**Sunday 29 October 2023. Last after Trinity (Proper 25).  
Psalm 1**

**We delight in the Lord, who will refresh and nourish us.**

Sometimes it can be exhausting to be giving all the time. Sometimes we can feel as though we have little left to give – no more resources, no more time, no more energy. We are empty.

Psalm 1 gives us an image of trees beside a stream. They are constantly able to take up water with their roots and nourish and refresh themselves. The nutrients that they take in from the water and the energy they get from the sun are transformed by action within the trees' cells into more leaves and fruit. As a result, their leaves do not wither and they can give their fruit when it is time to do so.

Generosity, especially when we give of ourselves, also requires that we replenish our stocks and find refreshment. For the psalmist, this refreshment is found in meditation on, and delight in, the law of the Lord. How can we use our love for Jesus and delight in him who is the fulfilment of that law, to refresh us and nourish us, so that we too can keep giving our fruit?

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**Sunday 5 November 2023. 4 before Advent.  
1 Thessalonians 2.9-13**

**Does paid or unpaid ministry offer better value?**

As a Diocesan Secretary, working five days a week to support parishes across the diocese I'm paid for my work for the Church. As a Licensed Lay Minister (Reader) preaching and leading worship, I'm a volunteer. I see both as complementary sides of my ministry – both equally important.

There are many models of ministry – some paid, some unpaid – and at different times in Paul’s life he experienced both. It’s often said that we value what we pay for – but anything which we have bought comes with an expectation of value for money – and if not, that we will have some recourse to the seller. There is a risk that we seek to judge whether ministry is “value for money” – and that is ultimately fruitless, for it is only through God’s eyes and according to his perspective that our calling can be seen to be fulfilled or not.

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**12 November 2023. 3 before Advent.  
Matthew 25: 1-13**

**Are we prepared to meet him?**

Remembrance Sunday gives us the opportunity to give thanks for those who generously gave up their lives for the sake of their loved ones and those not yet born.

Today we are called to wait with hope for the coming of Christ, using the wisdom brought to us by the Scriptures. We are encouraged to stay awake because, just as those who died in war, we don't know either the day or the hour.

Are there things that we would do if we knew our time was short? Are there relationships in our lives that are in need of healing? Are there things we need to say to people that we keep putting off?

Are we like the wise bridesmaids – open minded, alert and fully prepared, being generous in our preparations? Or like the foolish bridesmaids – closed minded, with pockets of our lives untouched by the Gospel message; unprepared because we’ve buried our heads in the sand to other possibilities?

By being generous in our relationships, ready to forgive, ready to say sorry ourselves, and open to God’s prompting to go the extra mile generously for one another, we will be emulating what God does for us.

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**Sunday 19 November 2023. 2 before Advent.  
Matthew 25.14-30**

**Everything we own belongs to the Lord**

Today’s Gospel reading has featured in many church fundraising initiatives, where each member is offered a small sum of money and invited to go away and

trade with it and bring back the proceeds. As in Jesus' story, the results tend to vary widely!

However, I suspect that when Jesus told this story he was not thinking about fundraising but about stewardship. A silver talent was a substantial sum of money, so the man going on a journey was showing real trust in his slaves to steward his resources for him in his absence.

As Jesus' final journey reaches its climax, he commissions his disciples to carry on his business, entrusting them with his life and power, and charges them to use it for his glory not their own, reminding them that on the day of his return, they will be held to account.

Two thousand years on it is good to be reminded that all that we 'own' in fact belongs to the Lord, and one day he will return and ask us how well we have used what has been entrusted to us to carry on the work of God's kingdom among the least, the last and the lost.

How might that knowledge affect my spending choices this week?

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**Sunday 26 November 2023. Christ the King.  
Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20 – 24**

**'I myself will search for my sheep'.**

We often think of important leaders as people with large entourages and lots of staff to do things for them. When the king invites people to a garden party at Buckingham Palace, you can be sure that he has not personally fired up the barbecue! When a head of a government or large corporation promises to do something, they usually mean that they will ask someone on their staff to look into it and take action.

But in our reading from Ezekiel God gives us another model of leadership. 'I myself will search for my sheep' he says. God's generosity does not lie in waiting for, or even asking, others to do things. It is rooted in God's own willingness to take action, even actions that might be left to others. 'I will seek the lost, bind up the injured, feed them and rescue them,' says God. 'I will do whatever needs to be done.'

In Christ we have a king who himself gave up power in order to serve. Can we, like him, be generous enough to roll up our own sleeves and lend our hands to God's work?

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**Sunday 3 December 2023. Advent 1.  
1 Corinthians 1.3-9.**

**Thankfulness, Gratitude and God's Grace**

"For all Your goodness I will keep on singing, Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find" goes the song. It's easy to miss our blessings – especially the things that we don't notice or see. Every breath that we take is a gift from God, every moment of being loved, every glimpse of nature. The gift of eternal life through Jesus is unseen too, yet is more precious than any other blessing.

Swiss philosopher Henri Frederic Amiel wrote "Thankfulness is the beginning of gratitude. Gratitude is the completion of thankfulness. Thankfulness may consist merely of words. Gratitude is shown in acts." Gratitude shapes our attitude – we move from entitlement to recognition that we are blessed far more than we deserve by the grace of Jesus.

Peter Maiden's book "Radical Gratitude" ends 'My final word on a book on radical gratitude – rely solely on the amazing grace of God'.

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## **Sunday December 10 2023. Advent 2.**

### **Psalm 8: 1-2, 8-end.**

#### **Can you give of your time?**

As we prepare for Christmas we see the streets of our towns festooned with twinkling lights, shops decorated with Christmas trees and gifts displayed to tempt in the shopper.

In the materialistic hype, people can forget that Christmas is all about God's generosity. Our Psalm today reminds us that God is a generous giver who forgives and restores, who brings peace to those who love him and salvation as we believe in him.

At this special time of year when we have time to reflect upon our coming Christian celebration, we might consider how we can be generous, not necessarily by indulging in a materialistic kind of giving but simply by giving our time to a person who is alone, or sharing a meal with them, even shopping for them instead of ourselves. Being generous with our time, giving what is good just as God has done for us, can be the most precious gift we can give to another.

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**Sunday 17 December 2023. Advent 3.  
Psalm 126.**

**'The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.' Psalm 126.3**

In Scripture, God is not a God of scarcity but of abundance. The psalmist looks back to times in the past when God had acted powerfully to restore the fortunes of his people. Those memories inspire the psalmist to pray for a similar restoration in his or her own day of calamity. The writer uses two images of abundance, when dry watercourses gush again after the seasonal rains, and when those who sow seed despite tears and scarcity later return to harvest sheaves in abundance.

Sowing corn in the ground when supplies are low takes great faith. Yet without generous sowing there can be no harvest. When we look at the problems that confront us today, are we able to look with the psalmist's eyes of faith on the dry watercourse or the near empty bag of seeds, and praise the God of abundance, trusting that God will again provide fresh water to drink and sheaves of corn?

If times are hard for us in this cost of living crisis, can we dare in faith to still sow small seeds of generosity, trusting that God will in time return a joyful harvest?

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**Sunday 24 December 2023. Advent 4.  
2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16**

**God's promise to King David.**

King David was in a good place – and he knew it. Life had been generous to him, not least in providing him with a sturdy house of cedar wood. He wanted to be generous in return – by building God, the source of his good fortune, a house of God's own.

But God had different ideas. God didn't want David's generosity – at least not expressed in this way. Instead, God wanted to continue being generous to David in establishing the throne with his descendants forever.

How often do we try to force our own ideas on other people, out of a mistaken sense of our own generosity, instead of listening to them? Instead of giving people things that we think they must want, can we instead offer them the generosity that recognises who they truly are, and be generous with whatever they really need for them to be the people God is calling them to be?



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