

17th July 2016

Matthew 6.1-15

This week saw one of the two candidates to become simultaneously leader of the UK's Conservative Party and Prime Minister drop out, leaving her rival to claim the crown without any further voting. The reason Andrea Leadsom withdrew was a sustained media campaign against her that by Friday last week was being described by seasoned political commentators as “feral” and based on prejudice towards her Christian faith. It was being claimed that her support for traditional marriage and family values, rather than wholeheartedly endorsing every aspect of the gay rights agenda, was morally wrong and that being a Christian in politics somehow made her suspect. Her inner private faith was seen as a public threat. How we express our faith in public is a question that Jesus tackles in today's passage.

This is a day in which we are commissioning our team to go off to Nicaragua and the Bible reading is all about your motive in doing good and being generous. Who are you doing it for?

We have been looking at the Sermon on the Mount this month. We have considered who Jesus thought blessed and we have looked at how Jesus thought we should live out

our faith in the world, particularly how we love our enemies. Now in this section he speaks about our intimate relationship with God.

In one of the most challenging sections of the entire Bible, Jesus looks at the three pillars of his contemporary Jewish piety: giving, praying and fasting. Again he contrast how his followers should act with the actions of the Pharisees and the pagans. The religious people – the Pharisees –he called ‘the hypocrites’ who liked everyone to see how religious they were and how good they were. They were ostentatious about their faith. The irreligious – ‘the pagans’ – had no reality about their relationship with God. When they prayed there was a mechanical formalism. Followers of Jesus are to be unlike either of these.

First of all Jesus guidance on being a generous giver.

He starts off with the words ‘so when you give to the needy...’ Jesus assumed his followers would give. A devout Jew would give in two ways: by tithe, a tenth of his income (compulsory) and secondly by giving alms (voluntary). To give alms was beyond the letter of the Law with special merit attached. In total a devout Jew would give away at least a sixth of his income.

The act of giving is part of what it means to be a Christian. It is one of the things that happens when you know the

love of Christ in your life. Martin Luther the great reformer who next year we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the reformation, said that three conversions take place: the conversion of the mind, the conversion of the heart and the conversion of the wallet.

To be converted requires a change of heart and attitude. Before we are converted we tend to think that our money is our own and that we have the right to do with it whatever we like. When we are converted we realise that everything we have belongs to God, and that it is he who is sharing it with us.

Sometimes people say ‘I work really hard for the money I’ve got’. This may be true, but where did the energy, ability and gifts come from? When we come to Christ, we should realise that rather than being owners of our money, we are managers; the stewards of God’s gifts to us.

When we land in Nicaragua we will realise that the world is hugely unfair. Where you are born will determine your life chances. We will meet many gifted and able Nicaraguans who will be living in metal shacks grinding out an existence and trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty. We will come back to our land of plenty and our reactions will be telling. When my daughter Jo came back from Nicaragua two years ago I remember that for a month

she couldn’t go into one of our supermarkets because it would make her so guilty at the choice and luxury we could afford.

It is convenient for those who don’t believe in God – that is the way the world is they would say, survival of the fittest and all that. It is more problematic for people of faith who believe God is the God of all the world not just the one who has blessed us in Britain.

With that in mind the Bible expects followers of Jesus to be generous and give to God’s work. But to give with the right motive. Elsewhere in scripture we are told to give regularly, proportionately, generously and cheerfully and not resentfully. Here Jesus puts giving first in the catalogue of secret activities in our relationship with God. He speaks about it even before prayer. What you do in secret reveals who you truly are. Does your monthly bank statement reveal your Christian principles and priorities?

To Jews, giving was the most sacred of all religious duties, but the rabbis forbid ostentatious giving. It was this that Jesus affirmed by denouncing the Pharisees who like to give and announce it with trumpets. They like to blow their own trumpets – is an everyday expression of those who like to receive praise and honour from others for their great deeds.

When something like Children in need or Comic relief is on the TV I do find it a bit nauseating when the millionaire chief executive of some organisation worth billions of pounds comes on with a huge cheque made out for a few hundred thousand quid and says look at us, we have corporate responsibility, we are a caring sharing organisation! There is a fine line between wanting publicity to say can you support this cause and what I am trying to do and the publicity being more about 'look at me' supporting this good cause. Jesus teaching here challenges our inner secret motives.

To avoid the danger of self-righteousness, self-congratulation and pride, he commends the principle of secret giving. Don't let your right hand know what your left is doing. Altruism is often displaced by egotism.

My wife wrote a book about John Laing the founder of John Laing Construction Company. Originally set up in Carlisle at the turn of the twentieth century early on in his business John Laing was facing bankruptcy due to a court case brought by a client. Feeling depressed John Laing went out to pray. He had a view of Furness Abbey near Barrow. He prayed that he'd had enough. He had been so successful and ambitious that it had nearly ruined the company and he had worried his parents in their old age. He said sorry to God and asked for a way through these

problems. If the company survived he promised that he would do things differently in the future.

A little while later the company won the court case and John Laing remembered his promise on that hillside. He decided that being a Christian was the most important thing in life, more so than his business. Even though he ran a multimillion pound company he would still teach Sunday school and go to church. Secondly he wanted others to be blessed by the money the company made. So he ensured his workers were paid well and given pensions, some of the first in the country to do so. He also set up a special trust fund that would give a portion of his money away to charity and Christian organisations. So many Christian organisations owe their existence to the generosity of John Laing – but they never knew where the money came from. His motive in giving was to honour God and to express love and gratitude for God's blessing on his life.

Giving is a way to become like God. A God who gives – who gave his only Son because God so loved the world. It is the path to holiness. Giving prides our souls away from the constricting grip of materialism that destroys so many lives. So later in this chapter Jesus warns us to choose our master well – either God or money. One will bring joy and life, the other will bring slavery. John Wesley, the founder

of the Methodist Church said. ‘When I have any money I get rid of it as quickly as possible, lest it find a way into my heart’.

That is the reward from God for giving: a better heart. It is our prayer that all those who come back from Nicaragua will come back with more compassionate hearts than when they set off. The people I know who are generous seem to be so much happier and freer and lighter in their souls. One of the surprises and challenges we will experience out there I’m sure will be the generosity of the poor towards us. Those who have nothing are still willing to share what little they have.

When I was out in Africa many years ago I remember having to visit a remote village in the jungle and as a white clergyman I was greeted like royalty. The people slaughtered their best chicken to cook a meal for me. It was awful. There was bone and grizzle and cartilage floating in a thick soup. It was like something from an Indian Jones movie. I struggled to eat it. But as I left one of the villagers asked me, with a smile on his face, if I had enjoyed this special meal they had cooked for me. I lied and said thank you. He said it was very expensive – worth a month’s wage – but worth it for such a special visitor. I wept in the car all the way home for my lack of gratitude and disrespect.

May God give us generous hearts.

May God also give us hearts for prayer. For many people prayer is a bit like a first aid kit or fire extinguisher – a last resort for use only in emergencies. Rather like the vicar who said ‘I guess all we can do is pray’ to which the church warden said ‘Has it come to that!’

Jesus taught his disciples to pray and assumed they would do so. Prayer was Jesus top priority. Communication is so important in any relationship. But again Jesus says when you pray don’t be like the hypocrites who stand around in synagogues and on street corners so other people can see them praying. Jesus of course prayed in public and I don’t think he was getting at those of us who also pray in public. But what he was pointing at was the motive of those who pray in public. Are you more concerned about what others think about you and the words you use – or more concerned about communicating honestly and humbly with the creator of the universe. Like giving – what you do in private is the test of who you really are. When no one is watching you is your heart in the right place.

Unlike the pagans babbling away in prayer do not be like them says Jesus. Your Father knows what you need. The pagans of Jesus day would try and recite incantations and magic words which they would repeat over and over again

to try and persuade some god or goddess to be favourable to them. They were trying to get the right formula. The Lord's Prayer is not a formula but a framework. It tells us that prayer is not a magic formula which plugs into a secret charm or spell. But it is an invitation to talk with God who is like a Father to us. Like a parent we are invited into a conversation to share concerns and also to share in the Father's concerns for the world.

When we pray your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven we are reminded that prayer is as much listening as it is asking. We may come to God in prayer full of our own importance, our own anger, self-righteousness, we know best, we have the answer - but in prayer we come before the scrutiny of God. Are our attitudes and motives worthy of God's kingdom or not. We are made to reflect whether we are in tune with the Heavenly father's will we so desire to have.

Of course we can ask – give us this day our daily bread – but if we spend time with God our hearts will have been touched for his love for all the world and that prayer is a communal ask – give US this day – not give me my daily bread – but in a starving poor world we pray for all needs and in prayer we may realize that we are being called to answer our own prayer.

We pray for forgiveness for we are part of the mess. Yet forgiveness is remarkably available to all from a gracious God. The only condition is to forgive others. As Jesus explains later: the heart that will not open to forgive others will remain closed when God's own forgiveness is offered.

The prayer ends with a sombre and realistic note. Jesus would walk into darkness and the suffering of the cross. Neither should we expect to be spared the darkness ourselves. Darkness fell over Nice the other day with horrible evil acts done to innocent people. We pray to be kept from despairing and giving in to evil and the worst ravages it can bring; we pray to be delivered from evil both in the abstract and in the personal – the evil one.

Here is the framework Jesus knew we would need. If you want to pray for us whilst in Nicaragua - use the Lord's Prayer. If you want to pray - this is where to start. Here is your heavenly father waiting and longing for you to use it day by day as you grow in your knowledge love and service of him. Make it your own, but don't show off.

May God give us a heart to give and a heart to pray.