**Sermon Dursley Tab 1st July**

I wonder if you enjoy playing games like Monopoly. People in my experience either love them or hate them. My sons’ family is split down the middle so it’s only when they come together with other friends and wider family members that my son and grandson get the chance to play. For most people a game like that is all about winning, isn’t it. In Monopoly you want to acquire the best properties that attract the best rents and of course ultimately to get the full sets so that you can put up houses and hotels and beat everyone into submission by making them bankrupt through the extortionate rents as the hotels go up. I’ve never seen much generosity or kindness going on in the game, and that’s probably why my granddaughter and her mum refuse to play.

Along the way in the game, you can hear, oh that’s not fair, you must be cheating, and where did you get all that money from. And as you traverse the board you’re usually relieved to have some respite in jail as the rents hike up, so you can avoid paying out for a few gos.

Today we continue our study of 2nd Corinthians focussing this week on the first part of chapter 8. Paul is rather tentatively having a bit of a go at the Corinthians about their lack of generosity and action. You’ll recall that Paul had less than a positive relationship with the church there. The last time he had been there he had been forced to leave with his tail between his legs as they rejected him. Now they appear to have come to their senses and are awaiting his arrival again but he is cautious about how to approach this delicate topic.

The previous year Paul had urged the churches to see how they could help the church in Jerusalem after a severe famine there and extreme suffering among the Christians there. Paul tells the Corinthians how the church in Macedonia in particular has been exceptionally generous, that is the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica. Their response has come even though they too are suffering hardship and persecution there, but they have found it in their hearts to give beyond their means to relieve their fellow Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul describes their giving as a work of grace, such is their devotion to God, and to the unity and work of the gospel, it can only be seen as an act of grace led giving.

So Paul is contrasting their speedy response with the lack of action on the part of the Corinthians. It seems that in the first flush of enthusiasm they may have started collecting but it’s stalled and there is no news about it. So Paul urges them to finish the job and get their collection completed.

Did you notice how in all this explanation and exhortation to the Corinthians never once does Paul mention money! He uses the words, grace, gift, the deed, partnership, the service. It’s obviously a very sensitive subject and Paul seems to be going out of his way not to upset them.

In fact the commentaries tell us how in this and the next chapter the Greek is laboured and awkward. Paul is struggling to get to the point!

So Paul focusses on the grace of giving - the willingness to be generous – the importance of being fair and proportionate in action – and most importantly that such giving and action must come from a grace-filled heart, not just out of duty.

Paul praises the Christians there for all the things that the Corinthians excel in – in faith, in speech, in knowledge and in their earnestness – but their deficit is in their grace of giving.

Paul also highlights the need for unity across the Christian churches; remember the Christians in Jerusalem were Jewish converts whereas the Greek Christians were Gentiles. Was there a difference of opinion in Corinth about what response was needed, did they disagree? We don’t know but it wasn’t for lack of means. Corinth was a city of extremes with a great deal of affluence and it would seem that the Christians could well afford a generous response.

The final verse in our passage recalls God’s provision to the Israelites when they were in the wilderness and their dependence on the daily manna that fell from the skies. Paul quotes Exodus ch 15. V 18 reminding the Corinthians

“He that gathered much did not have too much, and he that gathered little did not have too little.”

In other words whether they gathered too much or too little each day each had sufficient for the day – not too much and not too little……….A warning against holding onto their wealth perhaps.

So what is a fair balance between our own and other’s needs? We see so many divisions in the world coming from the unequal division of resources and wealth. The global division between the north and the south hemispheres seem to get bigger and bigger. As a church we do our best to respond to emergency appeals and with regular giving to agencies like Christian Aid. Our action is small in the face of such problems but we do what we can.

Nationally we have a spectrum of views about how much money we as a society should spend to meet the needs of others. This is reflected in the reductions to the budget of overseas aid, and at home in our benefits system.

Those of us who are involved in the work of the Foodbank have seen how the needs of local people here in Dursley have been severely affected by the introduction of Universal Credit and a system that just doesn’t seem to be fair in its application. As a result many families are left with no resources for up to six weeks. What’s more there appear to be all kinds of problems with the current Access to work scheme that is revealing a number of inequalities.

In our church we have many volunteers who give of themselves relentlessly to meet the needs of others. But Paul is telling the early church to seek a fair balance between meeting others needs and meeting their own. And we need to reflect that too in our church life. It’s no good if a few people burn themselves out by working constantly for the church, or giving so much that they are left in need themselves.

The wonder is that as we share our blessings with others we often find that they bring blessings to us. If we as a society support people for example to access work, then we all may benefit from their achievements. And folks who contribute to the relief of poverty, or have volunteered on a project or visited someone at home or in hospital, have felt that they have received more blessings than they gave.

As a church we have been blessed over recent years with a thriving ministry, positive youth and development work, and the giving of money from individuals and the receipt of grants from other bodies so that we can get much work done.

We are now faced with our final phase. But we are still in need of generous giving to keep our daily costs paid for and our workers’ salaries met. And we do sometimes have to talk about money and can’t skirt around it. Our church work comes at a cost and our actual weekly giving has not increased with inflation over the last couple of years which I find surprising. The URC encourages us to give 5% of our income to the local church and the other 5% to other charitable causes as we can.

So let us prayerfully be challenged today about what we can give and continue to be joyful givers, not because we are being asked, but because of our grateful response to Christs ever giving love and blessing.

In our Psalm today the author gives such praise to the Lord for being lifted out of the depths of despair, for being healed, for transforming wailing to dancing and mourning to joy. And closes O Lord my God I will give you thanks for ever.

In chapter 9 Paul reminds his readers that god loves a cheerful giver.

“And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need you will about in every good work”

We have so much to be thankful for. We live in a country with freedom of speech, and of religion and freedom to travel from place to place. Unlike so many places in the world we have opportunities and chances in life through a free education system and access to free health care.

Many of us have had our faith renewed time and time again as the Spirit of God has lifted us from despair and depression. Many have been healed in mind and body through God’s healing power. And many have come to know the deep love of God in their hearts.

As we prepare to come to this our Lords table today we remember Jesus amazing sacrifice, dying for us so that we might be saved. He couldn’t give more than his life. So what can we give from our grateful hearts, through God’s grace?

So may we renew our commitment to be cheerful givers whether it be of our money, our talents, our time and energy, our prayers, our compassion, our action for justice and our concern for the Lord’s creation.

May our joy in Christ, and his blessings to us, be balanced by our prompt response and loving action to this our local church, our wider community and the needs of the World that we might be his faithful grace filled servants striving for the Kingdom of God.

Amen