

GENEROUS

LENT

Sample Sermon 2



WEEK TWO: SAMPLE SERMON GENEROUS LENT

FIRST READING:

Exodus 16:6-15

SECOND READING

2 Corinthians 9:6-8, 10-15

GOSPEL READING

Mark 6:30-44

We come to our bible story in Generous Lent. Our Gospel reading is the well-known story of the Feeding of the 5,000. Notice that, just like last week, we are in the desert with Jesus. That's the place where we do serious business with God.

This is an important story. It's the only miracle of Jesus told in all four Gospels. It's a story important to Mark because he comes back to it a few times. It's an important story in Generous Lent. In the midst of scarcity God gifts abundance and the story includes the most beautiful and powerful image of what it means to be a steward of all God gives to us.



OPTIONAL STORY: KEPLER'S SNOWFLAKE

In Prague, in 1611 a bitterly cold man called Johannes Kepler watched a snowflake land on his coat. He was brilliant, mathematician to the Holy Roman Emperor- who didn't always pay his wages. Kepler had no money but wanted to give a New Year gift to his friend, Wacker von Wackfels. As a joke he thought he would give his friend a book about, nothing; perhaps a grain of sand or a drop of water.

But crossing the Charles Bridge in Prague a snowflake landed on his coat. People already knew snowflakes were six sided stars. Kepler got to thinking why this was so. Why not five, or seven? His conjecture was right, it took 400 years to explain why. Kepler thought there must be a six sided hexagon involved, because it was known from stacking cannon balls that a hexagon is the most efficient use of space, like bees creating a honeycomb.

At the heart of every snowflake is a hexagon. The hexagon is created by electromagnetism, the two hydrogen atoms and the one oxygen atom. In the clouds, water vapour meets specks of dust or pollen and the molecules create a hexagon shape. It has rough edges so as it falls with gravity it attracts more water molecules which attach to the edges of the hexagon giving the six sides shape of a snowflake. The shape of each snowflake is formed by the humidity and temperature in the air through which it falls. So every snowflake is different.

And every snowflake has symmetry, you can cut it like a cake into identical fragments. This symmetry is found everywhere in nature. Also, every snowflake is not white but transparent. They only look white because they have so many edges and the edges catch the light, giving the appearance of colour.

[A short animated video voiced by Brian Cox is at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjl_mqcM_4w. See also, www.seh.ox.ac.uk/blog/johannes-kepler-on-snowflakes.]

Why tell this story? Because every snowflake is created a few simple and essential laws of physics. But every snowflake is unique, because of its individual journey - to land on you and me.

Generous discipleship is formed through some simple biblical principles we see in this story of the miracle of the loaves and fish. Everything we have is a gift from God. We receive it with gladness and gratitude. We hold it lightly and give it generously.

But generous discipleship for you and me is as unique as a snowflake. Formed by the same biblical principles your generous discipleship will look a little different to mine but as beautiful in every way as we hold all that we have as blessed and broken.

1. WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

The people in the desert were hungry: they were hungry for Jesus' words and they were hungry for food. But all around them was scarcity - and a few loaves and fish simply reminded them that they didn't have enough.

But, this was not the first time that God had met the physical needs of his people in the desert. Many people hearing this story early on would know the Old Testament story of the manna. Israel is a hungry people in a desert. They need food but there's more going on than just food. Moses tells the people that in the morning, gathering the manna bread, they will see not just food but the glory of the Lord (Ex 16:6).

There's more. When Mark's story was read to the early Church it rang bells with another well-known story. Look at v41.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples

Sound familiar? These are Jesus' actions at the Last Supper and the priestly actions at every service of Holy Communion, or Eucharist. The ordinary things of bread and wine carry a deep, spiritual reality.

Physical things carry spiritual meanings and our giving is no different. It's not a sacrament of course but it speaks of spiritual things. Money is part of our spiritual lives just like our worship, our bible reading, our prayers and more. Remember the three disciplines of Lent: prayer, fasting and giving. When we handle money we are handling God's gift to us. So how we live with our money is about how we follow Jesus.



Now, living faithfully with money is not just about our giving. It is about our spending and saving, our borrowing and repaying, about our wise and careful planning for the future. But our giving is the litmus test of discipleship around money. Or to put it differently, giving is the hallmark of our financial discipleship.

In the UK, four precious metals need hallmarks; the obvious one is gold. First introduced in 1300 a Hallmark is made up of three elements. The first is the 'maker's mark' so every piece of hallmarked jewellery can be traced back to the maker. The second is the quality or 'fineness' mark – for gold that is whether a piece is 9 carat, 14 carat, 18 carat or 22 carat gold. The third element is the mark of the assay office which tested and hallmarked the gold. [1]

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- When our giving is planned, regular and committed that's like the makers mark. We are saying that God is the owner and the giver of all we have.
- When we give generously, with gratitude, obedience and joy, that's the quality mark; we honour God with the first and best of all he has given to us.
- And when we name our church on the Parish Giving Scheme (the best way to give for most people and for every church) that's our local office mark; it is our commitment to maintain our wonderful church, to grow our ministry and resource our mission.

So, it's worth asking ourselves this Lent if our giving bears the hallmark of our discipleship around money. Is our giving hallmarked by the makers mark of knowing God has given us everything, the quality mark of our first and our best and the office mark of our commitment to the ministry of our church?

2. DISCIPLESHIP MEANS MAKING GOOD DECISIONS

Our reading begins with Mark 6:30: The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Earlier in chapter 6 Jesus had sent the Twelve to preach the Gospel. They come back excited and exhausted. They want time with Jesus but there are just too many things going on. So Jesus says to his disciples, 'Come, by yourselves, to a solitary place'. Mark uses the same phrase, solitary place, again in verse 32 and verse 35. It is an echo of the OT story of the manna. And in this solitary place they have space to talk and time to eat.

[1] Gold must be hallmarked at or above 1 gram; the other precious metals are Platinum (0.5grams); Palladium (1 gram) and silver (7.778 grams). There are four trading assay offices in the UK: Birmingham, Sheffield, Edinburgh and London. A few others no longer trade e.g. Chester which closed in 1962

The passage says something important about how we make our discipleship decisions. Jesus invited the disciples to find a rhythm: the busyness of their mission and then a stepping back to find rest, refreshment and renewal. It is a godly rhythm, important to our physical and mental health, to healthy relationships and much more.

We can't be living on the edge all the time. Lent invites us to slow down, to think and reflect so that we can make good discipleship decisions. It means different things to different people at different times of life.

And the story tells us not only what this rhythm looks like but also, why it matters. In verse 30 the Twelve are called Apostles and they teach – this is the only time that they are called that in Mark's Gospel and the only time anyone other than Jesus teaches.



But when they were faced with the needs of the crowd and the scarcity of the desert the disciples just don't get it. Were the disciples so exhausted that their spiritual senses were dulled? They were overwhelmed when Jesus asked them to feed the crowd themselves. They couldn't see the miracle that was possible and afterwards, they couldn't grasp its meaning for Jesus as Messiah (Mk 6:52).

Discipleship means making good choices, and that must include how we live with our money and possessions. All I know is that sometimes we get those decisions right, sometimes we don't. But we do have to make them.

We don't make good life decisions when we are exhausted or busy or pressured. We don't make good spiritual decisions if we are run down, stressed, out of our rhythm. And we don't always make good giving decisions when we are all of these things and when we are under financial pressure or our church is under financial pressure.

Like all life, like all discipleship there is a rhythm to our generous discipleship. Generous Lent is an invitation to stop and think and pray and decide what good giving to the life and ministry of our church looks like: for me, today, in my own circumstances.

So, it's worth asking ourselves this Lent if we are intentional about giving the time and making the emotional and spiritual space to think and pray about our giving so that we make good giving decisions?

3. SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

The disciples see the huge crowd. It's not that the disciples don't care for the people; of course they do. They know they are hungry and it is late. The obvious solution for them is in v36 and again in v37: send them to buy food. Jesus sees the same crowd and he has compassion. But Jesus sees the solution differently: you *give* them something to eat.

The disciples cannot believe what they hear. They cannot imagine how to meet the need. They feel overwhelmed by the problem. Instinctively, and understandably, they calculate the cost: 200 coins - six months wages to feed this lot!

This is the stewardship challenge facing many churches today. We're recovering from a pandemic and living with a cost of living crisis, high rents and mortgages and huge heating bills. So the financial needs and opportunities of our church can seem overwhelming with our scarce resources. Like the disciples, understandably, we think about financial transactions. How can we afford this?

But the miracle of the loaves asks us to see things differently. The miracle asks us to shift our thinking from scarcity to abundance. To think less about financial transactions and more about transformational generosity.

It is not about being financially irresponsible. Stewards don't do that. We must balance our budgets. But the miracle of the loaves and fish asks us to change our thinking, change our hearts around money. It's moving our thinking from the transactional to the transformational power of generosity.

Jesus doesn't despair at their lack vision. He's not disappointed that scarcity overwhelms their trust in God. God's people have been fed in the desert before now. So Jesus does two things which are so important to the life of generous discipleship:

- First, Jesus wants to turn their hearts and minds from the overwhelming scarcity so he asks them what they do have: five loaves and two fish. It's not much but in God's economy it's more than enough. Have we asked ourselves that one, simple question - what do I have? It's a game-changer for us. When we know what we have and receive it as a gift gratitude and giving can grow.
- Second, in a place of scarcity Jesus asks the disciples to be organised for abundance. Easy to say; harder to do. It's just worth thinking what it might mean. For you? For me? For our church? We share this journey into generosity so let's risk talking together. Let's read together the Bible stories of abundance and let's together break the bread of our personal stories and experiences and find our stories of abundance in the midst of scarcity.



4. BLESSED AND BROKEN

Jesus takes, blesses and breaks the bread in 6:41 and then Jesus gives to the disciples. This is the heart of Holy Communion; we kneel with open hands to receive all that God has done for us in Jesus. Then the disciples share what has been given to them.

This simplicity of receiving what Jesus gives and sharing generously is the heart of stewardship. There is no more beautiful picture of stewardship in the Bible. Everything we have, including our money and possessions, are God's gift and they come into our hands blessed and broken. They are blessed because God is the creator, owner and giver of all good things; given for our enjoyment and to be received with contentment and gratitude (1 Tim 6:7-10, 17-19). They are broken because our money and possessions, like every part of our life, are caught up in God's grace to us in Jesus who lived, died and rose again so that we might live life in all its fullness.

Stewardship is so much more than giving a little of our time and our talents and our treasure to God. It is so much more than paying for the life of our church. To be a steward, to be a generous disciple, is to hold all we have as broken and blessed.

And so, the goal of a Generous Lent is not only that our church has the resources it needs, or that we live a life of generous discipleship. The goal is to share in the life of Jesus and to give God the worship and praise of lives that are blessed and broken.

That's why in our Epistle today Paul says that generous giving not only meets human need but is also abundant, rich, packed with thanksgiving to God.

CONCLUSION

A final thought: there's a promise here. Mark tells us that, *all ate and were filled*. This is a reference to Deuteronomy 8:10, God's promise of abundance for Israel in a new land. It is a promise to you and to me, to our church and to our parish and the wider world. So three quick questions, for each of us as individuals and for us as a church:

- The *why we give* question is this: this Lent, can we choose to give generously as a spiritual discipline which trusts God's provision in the desert of hard times and as our worship and praise. All we receive comes to us, blessed and broken.
- The *how we give* question is this: are we 'organised for abundance', asking what that means for us and in practical terms, using the Parish Giving Scheme. Simple and safe, it is the most efficient and effective way to give to our church.
- The *what we give* question is this: does what we give to God's work in this church reflect the blessings God has given us and the sacrificial giving of Jesus who gave his life that we might live?

What's the one, single step we can take today to continue on our journey into generous discipleship? Like a snowflake, your journey is shared with others but is your journey, unique and special and valued. Amen.