

## ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 1<sup>ST</sup> JULY 2018

### MORNING PRAISE at RUYTON: EVENSONG at GREAT NESS

#### FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

A visiting minister was once preaching at a little chapel on the subject of “Giving”. During the sermon he was delighted when he saw a member of the congregation go to the side of the chapel and place a coin in a box, and a little later another did the same. Surely, the minister thought, his sermons had never before met with such immediate and practical response. On leaving the chapel at the end of the service he was stopped by one of the men, who said “I hope we didn’t disturb you, sir, but ours is a shilling-in-the-slot- meter, and we should have been in darkness if we hadn’t attended to it!”

Was there ever a minister who hasn’t, at some time or another, felt compelled to address his congregation on the sensitive subject of giving? Well, judging by that reading from Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, worries about matters financial are nothing new. When Paul wrote this letter, the Gentile churches were making a financial collection to help the impoverished church in Jerusalem, and in the verses which immediately precede today’s reading, Paul specifically mentions the Macedonian churches who have given extremely generously to the fund, despite being in very straightened circumstances themselves. The church at Corinth is much more able to afford to give financially, and indeed Paul acknowledges that they are rich in many other respects too – plenty of faith and what he calls “all kinds of eagerness” and they *had* made a start with the fund the year before, but now things seem to have come to a standstill. They have fallen out with Paul over a number of issues and at the time of writing, the relationship has become strained to the point where Paul is afraid that this will affect the amount the Corinthian Christians are going to contribute. He is very anxious to put things right, not just to be *personally* reconciled with them, but because he wants them to understand why the fund was started in the first place. He wants to show the Gentile churches that they are part of the same family as the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, and even more importantly he wants to show the Jewish Christians that these uncircumcised Gentiles, formerly regarded as outcasts, are now fellow members with them in God’s new family, united by faith in the risen Jesus.

It’s a tricky situation, so Paul proceeds very delicately. He phrases his entire appeal, not in terms of money as such, but in terms of *grace*. Often when we talk about “grace” in church circles we are thinking about the undeserved love and power which God showers on us by bringing us to faith in the first place and then by enabling us to live and grow as Christians. But Paul also uses the word to refer to what God wants to do not just *in* and *for* Christians but also *through* them. He says that it is this impulse, coming from God himself, which has encouraged the Macedonian churches to give with such reckless generosity. **They are living the Gospel, and this is a work of grace.** And he reminds the Corinthian Christians that it was the grace, the overwhelming loving generosity of Jesus, who allowed himself to become poor, so

that they could become rich in all the ways that really counted. And Jesus had finished what he started. It was because he didn't lose heart halfway through the job, but was obedient even to death, that they not only had new life now, but also the promise of life everlasting.

And this loving generosity, this grace, this gift of new life now and in eternity is the underlying theme of our reading from Mark's Gospel. Here we have two human interest stories rolled into one, both of them much the same as those we frequently read about in today's newspapers. There's a father, desperate to save his dying daughter, and a woman whose life has become a living hell because of an illness for which there is apparently no cure. On the face of it, these two stories seem to be about the triumph of faith over adversity, and of course they are – Jesus stressed the importance of faith in every miracle he performed. But if we look below the surface, Mark is not only writing about the importance of faith. He is also giving his readers the same message that Paul was so anxious to give to both Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early Church. **“There is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free... male or female...for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”**

Jairus is a President of the Synagogue, an important man in the community, and certainly a Pharisee, one of those who regard Jesus as a blasphemous trouble maker, who consorts with outcasts and sinners and whose theology is extremely suspect. Most of them not only reject Jesus' teaching, but are constantly looking for ways actively to oppose him, and it's a measure of just how desperate Jairus is that he forgets all about religious controversy, or the dignity of his position, or what his fellow Pharisees will think of him, and throws himself down at Jesus' feet, begging him to save his dying daughter. And Jesus' response is a measure of his generosity. He doesn't try to score points by refusing to help someone he could be excused for regarding as an enemy; he simply sees a fellow human being in need of his help, and he doesn't hesitate for a moment – he goes off immediately to Jairus's house, followed, of course, by an excited crowd desperate to be in on the action.

And they get even more action than they bargained for, because on the fringes of this crowd is a woman who is every bit as desperate as Jairus albeit on the other end of the social scale. Originally, she must have been quite well off, but twelve years of forking out for medical treatment which hasn't helped her at all have left her with nothing – certainly no cure, but also no hope and, probably worst of all, no comfort and support from her fellow Jews who regard her as unclean because of her condition and treat her as an untouchable outcast. All she has left is faith in the power of this young prophet. For obvious reasons she is terrified of drawing attention to herself by approaching him openly, but she really believes that if she can just touch his clothes she will be cured. So she does, and immediately, she is. But she hasn't bargained for the cost of the cure, the cost for Jesus, who knows that power has gone out of him, and stops and says “Who touched me?” The disciples' reaction reminds me, as Wimbledon fortnight is about to start, of the McEnroe classic “You cannot be serious!” Being pushed and jostled as they all are, of *course* someone has touched him. But this was a special touch – and after the ordeal of public confession, the

woman has the joy and relief of hearing Jesus say “Go in peace, my daughter. Your faith has cured you.”

She’s been ill for twelve years. Jesus calls her “daughter”. Both facts very significant for those who have ears to hear. The number twelve was closely associated in Jewish thought with the twelve tribes of Israel – God’s chosen people. By calling the woman “daughter” Jesus is showing that she is no longer outcast but a loved and accepted member of the family, and also that, channelled through him, the grace of God offers healing and hope and new life not only to her but to all his children. And that same message, with even deeper implications, is repeated when Jesus finally arrives at Jairus’s house. “Your daughter’s dead!” they tell Jairus. “We’re too late!” Jairus tells Jesus, doubtless thinking that if it hadn’t been for that unimportant woman, they might have got there in time.

But Jairus has yet to learn that it’s never too late for saving grace, and social status has nothing to do with it. “Have faith!” says Jesus “She’s only sleeping!” And despite the mocking laughter of the professional mourners, he goes into the child’s room, takes her hand - here’s the importance of touch again - and tells her to wake up. And she does. And she’s twelve years old. Jesus is showing God’s people that not only can he give them new life in this world, but new life in the world to come as well. He knows of course, what the cost of winning that eternal life is going to be for him, and it was only by the grace of God that he was able to go ahead and pay the price. Mark understood that when he wrote his gospel. Paul understood it too. That’s why he writes to the church at Corinth about *that* grace of giving, and what it meant not only for the old Chosen People but now for the new family of God: a family where there are no outcasts, where no one is superior to anyone else by reason of wealth or social standing or ethnic origins; instead, a family united by faith in a risen, loving, generous Saviour. And if the family is truly to live the good news, that same grace must flow through them, to each other, as well as to the world.

And so it must be for God’s family today, whatever kind of giving we’re talking about. Giving that is motivated not by a vague feeling that we ought to, or because it will make us stand well in the eyes of others, or because of any other advantage to ourselves, but giving which is at the same time a grateful acknowledgement of God’s loving generosity to us, and also a means of passing on the grace of our Lord to anyone and everyone who needs it. Of course it will cost us, but we have to trust that the love and power of God will help us to pay the necessary price. And there’s many a true word spoken in jest. In that shilling-in-the-slot story I told at the beginning, one of the men who had been feeding the meter pointed out to the minister that if the necessary price hadn’t been paid they would all have ended up in darkness!

Amen.

