

Stewardship Sermon 2
2 Timothy 2: 19-21
Sunday 24th January 2010, Parish of Broxbourne with Wormley

Recently, I took some old pictures of St Augustine's to be all cleaned up and re-framed, and they now look very smart. One of them interestingly, shows all the old Georgian box pews still in place, but subsequently replaced by the Victorian ones now. It reminded me how living Christian communities put their own mark on our places of worship during our period as stewards of the Gospel – during our time.

As we look at all our buildings, we see constant change and development. The Wormley Church Room has undergone complete refurbishment over the past years, thanks to having a regular user. The Parish Centre is always having improving and updating work done – the latest being the addition of a disabled / family toilet. Both churches have old parts renewed or replaced over the years like the kitchen and loo at St Laurence and the lighting and sound at St Augustine's, and the Parish Office, new in 2006. This re-furbishing or re-vamping is all for God's purposes, all for the Gospel. Sometimes it's necessary to strip away the old and re-decorate with the new – very like something St Paul said in our reading.

Paul is talking about change of use here, though not of buildings, but of people – men, women, boys and girls, who consciously over time, change their life from one set of priorities to another; people who under Jesus Christ, change the main purpose of their lives or the direction of it. And with that change, goes 'substantial redecoration.'

V.20 & 21 (p.1131)

'In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for disposal of refuse. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the master and prepared to do any good work.'

Paul here is talking about a large house. In it there are bits that are only used 'in the dining room' (gold for special purposes – I'm sure yours is not all gold!). Conversely, there are stained dishes, knives and spoons etc, only for use in the scullery – because their condition is only fit for 'the disposal of refuse'. However Paul says that it is possible to change – the ordinary wooden spoon can change into the golden ladle – and therefore find a noble purpose.

Of course this can't literally happen – and also all things, whether the wooden spoon or the gold ladle have their purposes. But Paul's point here is that **People can change**.

People can change the whole direction of their lives provided they are prepared for what I suppose what you might call 'a regular scrubbing by God's cleaning brush.'

And the essence of these verses is that **it is a complete privilege to serve Jesus Christ** – to be a part of his household's servant team.

Look at the second part of verse 21, '*...instruments for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work*' - in other words, our availability to God, our willingness to serve Him.

That is what the life of a Christian church is all about, serving the Master in many different ways from local service to those around us, to the vital mission support we give, transforming lives in desperate need elsewhere.

Yes, there is a duty, a debt of gratitude we owe to God, to serve Him because of what he has done for us. But here the emphasis is not on duty. It is on the incredible privilege – of being Jesus Christ's special implement to do his work here on earth.

This raises the whole level of the word 'servant' and the idea we have of 'service'. This isn't service like being asked to do a duty at school, where we were to be proud to be the ones who escaped what was asked of us. In contrast, the switched on, biblically minded Christian will jump at this service – will jump at the opportunity to serve the 'Master' – Jesus, the Master, Jesus my master, the master of the household.

Sometimes you will hear people who work in what would seem to be very unrewarding circumstances, e.g. low pay, difficult conditions, like looking after needy children, or working in a refuge, that for them what they do is a privilege as they serve others. The dedicated Christian will feel the same.

This year, as Ray mentioned last week, our annual stewardship focuses not only on the financial, but also on the practical side of our Christian lives. In the packs you will be given, there is much more to read on this, to help you as you think and pray, decide how you can contribute to the ministry and mission of our Christian communities here in Broxbourne and Wormley.

In addition to the financial commitment form, we are also asking you to return a commitment form on where you feel you may be able to practically help. For some of you, this will be restating things that you already do. For others, it will be new, and maybe some will be offering different or extra support.

For those who can't get about much, the ministry of praying for this parish and for us all is as vital as any.

A few words about money and the financial side of our annual stewardship...

In April 2005, seven months after I started here, we had our first stewardship weekend together. The long vacancy of 2 ½ years without a vicar had come to an end and we were all beginning to look for the future, to plan and hope.

In the literature for that weekend, we had set out the financial needs of the parish, including a large increase in our diocesan share following the end of the vacancy and our hope to be able to appoint a Parish Administrator. We needed an increase in our planned giving of £6.5k to break even.

On that Sunday, we all stood together, reflected on the grace of God, of His love for us and what our response to Him should be, and worshiped together and prayed together and in our services praised the One who has given us life and breath and everything else.

One by one over the coming days and weeks, individual responses came into our treasurer, by post, or in the plate on Sundays.

Outside our church doors, our communities got on with their daily lives, unaware of the little miracle that was happening in our churches.

Each envelope the treasurer received contained a pledge; the promise of a standing order, a regular weekly amount, a lump sum, a commitment to give. When the final total was added up some weeks later, we had raised out planned giving, not by the £7k needed to break even, but by over 20k, enabling us to go ahead with our Parish Office earlier and to re-structure and begin the new work God was calling us to do together.

We've come along way since then. We have an extremely effective and growing parish administrative function, which enables us to support, respond to and develop our ministry in a variety of ways. We have a full-time training curate with us, we have growth and we also have the capacity to share far more with those in desperate need – the real heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the love of God.

In 2010, after gentle growth in giving since 2005, it is time again to ask you to pray, plan and give in the same way. This year our costs will grow substantially. Mainly this is because we will now be paying to the diocese a full year's contribution for having a curate as Simon is well into his time here now (this is excellent value at just under 6k per annum!) In addition, there is also a larger than usual increase in the parish share we have been asked to pay to the diocese to fund ministry, due to our growth and for reasons explained in the pack.

This means that, were we not to have any increase in our giving this year, most importantly the income the parish receives from planned and committed personal giving (i.e. regular giving through standing order or the envelope scheme), the parish would have a deficit of £10k at the end of the year. Becoming a new planned giver or by increasing your existing giving to your church by as much as you can, could mean that we clear this deficit. I believe that that its important we do this and that this is more than possible.

But my most firm belief is in the grace of the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that this parish has in it, the love, grace and ability to respond to the big challenges and opportunities before us.

I also believe that in both churches, we are on the edge of a very positive period. Some challenges we share together – most importantly proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ into the communities and world of today, a fast changing and increasingly non-religious place, which needs God so much. Other challenges are more local, e.g. how best to maintain and use our church buildings to further this aim, and how to develop new plans for growth.

So it's time to think, plan, pray, and then pledge what we think God is calling us to give – not only financially, but also practically, in our God given talents and time, to continue to grow and develop our work for Him in our parish. Please return both commitment forms in the envelopes provided.

Please know that I or the staff never sees anyone's financial pledges. These are confidential and only for the treasurer Tony Wright to see.

The discernment in knowing how to respond will come as we spend time praying and responsibly planning how we use all that God has given us – how much we keep and how much we give away. And the fruit of this will be found in a sense of peace, joy and settled conviction about what we have decided to do – not a sense of guilt or duty, but peace and joy.

In 2005, we had that wonderful answer to our prayers which put us on the strong footing to be able to get things going. But this wasn't the little miracle. The real miracle took place in people's hearts, heads and then their hands, as they opened their eyes to the reckless generosity of God and allowed Him to begin to stir and challenge us to do the same. Only God can do this.

So how about you? Do you want the privilege of being an instrument for that noble purpose? Do you know what that purpose is and are you willing to enter into it? Are you ready to place again, all that you are and have into the hands of Jesus Christ to be his special instrument?

View your whole life as service for the Master and discover the amazing privilege of being used by Him. There is no greater joy than the sense that God has actually used us in some way.

Let's pray.....

Ian Tomkins, 24/01/10