



Preach **Matthew**

Personal reflection

(Year A Proper 16)

Matthew 16:13-20

Part one of a personal reflection for those preaching as part of Giving in Grace

“We don’t like talking about money in this church. And we really don’t like it when the Vicar does it!”

In 2 Corinthians 8:7 Paul urges his readers to “excel also in this grace of giving”. Preaching has a vital role to play in Christian formation, in teaching and shaping Christian thinking and action and this is no less true in the area of financial stewardship. Giving in Grace is a programme asking congregations to think biblically about the way in which we handle money. This is about so much more than simply raising funds to keep the church going. We need look no further than chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians. Here Paul provides sustained and extensive teaching about the Christian stewardship of money – and in the entire two chapters he never mentions the word “money” once! What he does mention repeatedly is *charis*, the Greek word for grace; their collection for Jerusalem is “a gracious act”.

To excel in the grace of giving we must be Biblical in our thinking and we must also be realistic and practical in our application of Biblical principles. Paul calls us to be gracious givers; we cannot do this if we do not teach people first to be regular planned givers. We cannot be gracious givers if our weekly or monthly giving is haphazard, unthinking and casual any more than we can mature in prayer if our pattern of prayer is undisciplined. It is hard to be generous or gracious if we are giving from the little that is left over when all our other priorities are accommodated. Effective stewardship preaching has three

characteristics: biblical reflection, leadership with integrity and practical application. As with all preaching the biblical text must be life for the preacher before it can be life for the congregation. This paper is the first of a two part personal reflection for those preaching as part of Giving in Grace. It is based upon the story of Peter’s confession in Matthew 16:13-20. Preachers with the responsibility of preaching should take some time to reflect upon their own personal discipleship and upon the financial element within that larger context.

Peter’s Confession

“*Who do you say that I am?*” There comes a point in discipleship, in our own journey of following Jesus when we are invited to make a decision, to consider afresh what we think about him. It is not just a request for a casual comment, a sound bite from someone not really that interested. This question is more fundamental, more personal than that.

Peter has known Jesus as a friend for perhaps three years. Like the crowds that sought out Jesus Peter has been touched by his preaching, moved by his compassion, amazed by his miracles and perhaps in turn shocked and liberated by the company he kept. Something ran deeper in Peter. John tells us that after the feeding of the 5000 the crowd began to desert



Jesus – not because of the miracle but because of Jesus teaching about being the bread of life. Jesus asked Peter and the other disciples if they too wanted to leave him. It was Peter, with insight and blindness in equal measure who spoke, as he so often did for everyone, you and me included, who said, “Where else shall we go, you have the words of eternal life”.

What Peter began to understand by the Sea of Galilee came to a head on the road to Jerusalem. “*Who do you say that I am?*” Peter had known Jesus as friend and miracle worker and prophet. Now in a moment of clear thinking, a moment of challenge and of decision he understood Jesus as Lord, the promised Messiah. It was the opening of a new chapter in Peter’s relationship with Jesus, a new phase of the journey. To Peter and the church born from his confession would be given the authority and power of Jesus and with that gift would come the responsibility to live out this faith.

No wonder that in verse 20 Jesus told Peter and the disciples to be silent and tell no one. They needed to make space for learning about what this Lordship of Jesus involved and it would be a hard lesson to learn. For Peter as for many Christians today walking with Jesus involved a roller coaster ride of emotions, of teaching and healing and blessing. But it was not yet in Peter’s experience not his imagination that faith in Jesus would involve suffering and death and resurrection. The idea of a suffering messiah was alien to the Jews, themselves suffering under Roman rule and awaiting a long hoped for freedom.

“*Who do you say that I am?*” This question is not just asked at the start of our Christian journey – when we

ask Jesus into our lives or declare our faith in the baptismal promises at confirmation. It is a question we are asked again and again through our Christian lives in many different ways. It may be posed by an expected or an untimely death, by criticism from colleagues at work, the failure of a marriage or personal tragedy. Each is a question asking about the meaning of the Lordship of Jesus for me

Money poses the question of Lordship in a unique and particularly pointed way. Martin Luther once said that we need three conversions – of the heart, of the head and of the wallet. Precisely because our money is so necessary and important to us for living it becomes so difficult for us to extend the Lordship of Jesus into this sensitive area of life. Some people see money as essentially evil, others as a sure sign of God’s blessing. Both are equally wrong. How we handle money is just a part of how we handle the gift of life that God has given to us. We can grasp it to ourselves and make it a possession or we can enjoy its blessings, living generously and graciously.

Though Peter spoke on behalf of all the disciples not every disciple would have his certainty. For some the claim would be too great, for others Peter would have said more than they could have said. They were not all of one mind about who Jesus was. The people to whom we preach are not all at the same stage in the journey. Some are our **core** members, long standing Christians who have faithfully practiced Christian giving and give proportionately of their income as Paul teaches. Others will be our regular **congregation**, planned givers, many willing to Gift Aid their giving. Some congregational givers will give sacrificially, others will give little more than a tip to God and perhaps 50% will not have reviewed their regular giving for over two years, often much more. Finally



some of our hearers will be newer members or people who feel most comfortable on the **fringe** of the church. They will not be members of any planned giving scheme and give only when they come to church. Others will give nothing at all and some will see no reason to give to a church they perceive to be a wealthy and prosperous institution

In our preaching we need to be sensitive to all within our congregation that we have broadly categorised as three groups. Developing bespoke resources that meet people where they are is a tougher task but one far more productive and sensitive than a single, undifferentiated blanket message to all church members. Such an approach seems true to the way Jesus approached his ministry, to the gospel of grace he preached. It helps draw people into the grace of giving as part of their spiritual journeys. We cannot ask our new members to do more than they feel able to do financially or indeed in any other aspect of their faith in the early days of their journey with Jesus. We cannot short change our committed members by failing to speak of the radical challenge to sacrificial discipleship that Jesus gives to those who would exercise authority and power in his name (Mt 16:18-19).

In Giving in Grace we call this *differentiation*, taking seriously the different experiences, starting points and places on their spiritual journey of each member of the church. Differentiation means that when preparing to preach ask yourself, "*What one thing, what single key message do I want each of these groupings in our congregation to take away from my sermon?*" For each bible passage the Giving in Grace preaching resources provide both background notes and sample sermons to assist preachers. In both notes and sermons you will find suggestions as to

how the passage can be applied to each of the three groupings in the church.

Finally, and most importantly, do we have integrity in our preaching? Before we place the challenge before anyone else in our church we have to ask the hard questions of ourselves. Has the question about the Lordship of Jesus touched the gift of money entrusted to us; has it touched our head and heart before we preach it to others?

In our bible passage Jesus asks the question of Peter. A little before he does so Jesus himself was revealed in glory along with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. The subject they were discussing? Jesus own journey to Jerusalem, to suffering, death and resurrection. He who asks the question of Peter has already faced the question in himself. ■

