Giving in Grace

Mark

Sermon notes

Background notes on
four passages in Mark's Gospel

contents

Mark 6:30-44
(NRSV)

Feeding the Five Thousand

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. 35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." 37 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" 38 And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." 39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Suggested readings
1 Chronicles 29:10-20 ■ Romans 8:31-39

This is the only miracle found in all four Gospels, a story full of contrasts: ministry and rest, abundance and scarcity, faith and failure, material need and spiritual hunger. At the heart of the story is a rich picture of what it means to be a steward: the bread the disciples share with the crowd they first receive from Jesus as both blessed and broken.

The miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand tells the story of how God abundantly supplies both physical and spiritual needs in a desert place. This is not the first time that God has done this. The disciples, the crowd and any Jewish readers of Mark's gospel would recall the story of God providing manna in the wilderness to feed Israel. At points in the miracle story there are echoes of that earlier miracle.

This feeding of the five thousand also recalls another story, one with which Mark's readers are familiar. When Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and shares the bread (Mk 6:41) the telling of the story is influenced by the Eucharistic practice of the church. At the heart of worship is a shared meal in which relationships matter, material needs are met and material things carry profound spiritual reality. And, as Paul reminds us, this sacred meal requires the sharing of rich and poor if it is not to bring judgement upon our life together (1 Cor 11:17-22). There is no sharp divide between the spiritual and material worlds; indeed the simple meal in Acts 27:35 has the elements of taking bread, thanking, breaking and eating. The material elements so necessary for human life are carriers of human flourishing and of profound spiritual reality. The stewardship implications are not to be missed. What we do under God with our money meets human need through the ministry and mission of our church. No less the offering of money, which of course takes place in our shared worship, has a sacramental character. Our giving speaks not just of needs met but the response of grace, faith and trust to God who gives us all things in Christ.

They reported all they had done

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is a significant story for Mark. He refers back to the miracle 6:52 and again in 8:17-21 while he also offers his readers the parallel story of the feeding of four thousand. In his gospel of discipleship Mark captures the insights and the blind spots of those who would follow Jesus. The feeding miracle

is immediately preceded in Mark by the Herod's execution of John the Baptist (Mk 6:14-29) but it is organically linked to the earlier mission of the Twelve in 6:6b-13. Mark may wish to contrast the feasting and dancing at court and the failure to see God's call of the Baptist over against the desert withdrawal of the Twelve and the feeding of the crowd, thus painting the first in a series of vivid contrasts.

Stewardship preaching might explore this contrast further. In a consumer society more is good, contentment is economic bad news and in Zygmunt Bauman's powerful phrase, the poor are redefined as flawed consumers. Our stewardship response is neither ascetic retreat nor unthinking collusion. This story invites us to withdraw our consent to unrestrained consumerism and to celebrate the material abundance of God's world in a way that releases the poor and hungry.

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Get some rest

In 6:30-34 Mark provides a scene setting introduction to the miracle. Significantly this is the only time in Mark where the disciples are called 'apostles' or when anyone other than Jesus teaches. The reason seems clear: they are apostles because they are *sent* by Jesus and they teach what they have learned from their Master. But here is another vivid contrast, these apostles and teachers will fail to understand the meaning of the miracle of the loaves (Mk 6:52).

The disciples report on the success of their mission but the crowd presses upon them. Mark captures this in his repeated use of 'many' (*polloi* and variants). There are 'many coming and going' (v31), many recognized Jesus (v33) and there was a large crowd (*polyn ochlon*) when he arrived and Jesus began to teach many things. They need rest and space and Mark uses a pregnant phrase in 6:31: come, by yourselves, to a solitary (*erēmos*, perhaps 'desolate') place. Mark's use of this word is intentional; he repeats it in 6:32 and again in 6:35. As noted above this is one of the ways in which the miracle of the loaves echoes the Exodus story of God's provision of manna in the wilderness

This godly rhythm of teaching and resting, of engagement and withdrawal, of activity and reflection is critical to a healthy life and ministry.

Thus Mark builds another vivid contrast in his story. On the one hand there is the press of the crowd and, we might add, the careful planning that prepares the crowd for the distribution of the loaves and fish (6:39-40). On the other hand there is the invitation to rest and the quietness of a desert place. Both have value, both are necessary. This godly rhythm of teaching and resting, of engagement and withdrawal, of activity and reflection is critical to a healthy life and ministry.

Could it be that with no time to eat themselves the disciples lost their ability to trust in Jesus to meet the needs of the crowd? Could exhaustion lie behind their desire to dismiss the crowd and its needs or their failure to grasp the meaning of the miracle? We don't know, but neither the bible text nor the reality of ministry burnout preclude such a reading. Ministry has its own rhythm and the same is true of

stewardship ministry in the local church. Stewardship both for the individual and the local church cannot mature if we only react to financial need or crisis or to the pressures of personal and church life. Without prayer, reflection and leadership a stewardship ministry risks lacking a vision of God's abundance, being overwhelmed by the need or fearful of scarcity.

Sheep without a shepherd

Jesus describes the crowd as sheep without a shepherd; he has compassion on them and begins to teach. It is interesting to note that the Greek verb here (*esplanchnisthē*) is linked elsewhere in the gospels to the healing miracles of Jesus (Mt 20:34; Mk 1:41) and the compassion that forgives financial debt (Mt 18:27).

The phrase 'sheep without a shepherd' (omitted by Luke and Matthew) carries more echoes of the Exodus story. It comes from Numbers 27:17 where Moses asks God to appoint a shepherd in his place and the imagery is strong in Ezekiel 34:5, 'Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?' Mark's story may also carry an echo of Moses' cry in Numbers 11:13, 'how can I find meat for all these people?' Some scholars note that Jewish tradition saw bread as a symbol of the Torah, the five books of Moses, and the five loaves may be understood to reflect that tradition.

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As Moses led his people in wilderness and fed them with manna so Jesus teaches and provides abundantly for those who follow him in the scarcity of the wilderness. And just as for Israel, the scarcity of the desert is for the disciples a place of both trust and testing. It is late. They propose dismissing the crowd so they can find food, a suggestion as compassionate as it is pragmatic. Instead Jesus commands them to provide for the crowd themselves. Here we come to the heart of the story and the most vivid contrast is painted. On the one hand there is the need of the crowd, the scarcity of resources and the solution of the disciples which is to send the crowd to *buy* food (v36), the verb being repeated again in v37b. On the other hand there is the abundant provision of bread and fish and the command of Jesus to his disciples to *give* the crowd something to eat (v37a). Again the verb 'to give' is used twice in v37, the second time on the lips of the incredulous disciples astonished at the impossibility of the suggestion made by Jesus.

Compared to Matthew and Luke at this point there is a rawness in Mark's account which captures something of the frustration, the incredulity, perhaps even the irritation of the disciples at being asked to do the impossible: it would cost six months wages to feed this lot! Joel Marcus observes that this part of the story 'ends on a note of spiritual deficiency that corresponds to, but is even more distressing than, the material deficiency that has occasioned it.' (p418). And the story presents us and our churches with a stewardship challenge. The needs and ministry opportunities facing the local church can seem to overwhelm scarce resources. Time and again congregations express

doubts that they can meet the financial challenge facing their church. The core challenge in this passage - you give them something to eat - can provoke incredulity, frustration, irritation and opposition. Faced with the need of the crowd the disciples instinctively and quite understandably calculate the monetary cost; they think in terms of financial transactions. We do the same today. Our response to financial difficulties can often be constrained by thinking only in terms of balancing a budget, of monetary transactions. And again like the disciples there can be some mystification as to how the spiritual life could possibly address this need.

The miracle of the loaves invites us to see things differently. It is an invitation to shift from a pragmatic, measured, transactional response to the ministry needs of our churches and to think more in terms of abundant, generous provision and trust in God's. To be sure, this is not an invitation to fiscal irresponsibility; churches must balance their budgets. But the miracle story challenges us to change our stewardship story from one of scarcity to abundance, from crisis to confident trust. How we talk about money in church must change from the language of financial transaction necessary for survival and problem solving to the language of expectation and transformative generosity which releases God's abundant provision.

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Take, bless, break, give

Jesus response is illuminating. Rather than reacting angrily to disbelief he asks two things of his disciples. First he asks what food they do have; the five loaves and two fish. Second, he asks them to arrange the people in groups so they are ready to eat. Joel Marcus finds in Mark's use of words an increasing orderliness. What begins as a crowd in 6:34 (*ochlos*) becomes eating groups (*symposia*) and then clusters (*prasia*) of 100 and 50 which, he suggests, may reflect Israel's military camp arrangements in Exodus 18:21, 25 and be further echoes of Exodus typology in the story.

Jesus takes, blesses and breaks the bread in 6:41, wording which is surely influenced by the words of the Lord's Supper. The bread is multiplied and Jesus *gives* (that verb again) to the disciples that which they then in turn set before (*paratithōsin*) the people. That which meets the need of the crowd is first blessed and broken by Jesus and the disciples share from their own hands what they have first received from Jesus.

God the creator is the owner and giver of all things and in his goodness entrusts it to us for our enjoyment, contentment, gratitude and giving.

This is a quite beautiful picture of the heart of Christian stewardship. All that we have, the wealth and possessions which God entrusts to us as stewards comes into our hands both blessed and broken. Stewardship is rooted in both creation and Christology. God the creator is the owner and giver of all things and in his goodness entrusts it to us for our enjoyment, contentment, gratitude and giving (1 Tim 6:7-10, 17-19). Meanwhile Paul bases his appeal to generosity on the example of Christ who became poor that we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). Mature stewardship is characterized by generosity because that we which we give we have first received,

from God. That which we receive as both blessed and broken we are commanded to share.

All ate and were filled and here again there may be an echo of the Exodus tradition, a reference to Deuteronomy 8:10, 'you shall eat and be full'. The Greek verb has the nuance of being completely satisfied and in Mt 5:6 is used in the Beatitudes of the promise of no longer hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The baskets in which surplus is collected are called *kophinos*. They were small wicker baskets and at a later date it seems formed traditional attire of the Jews. The twelve baskets may reference the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Something very visible happens in that people are fed but how the miracle happens remains invisible, unseen. And that is how it is with our giving.

There is no indication in the story that the people knew a miracle had taken place and perhaps here is a final contrast in this story. Something very visible happens in that people are fed but how the miracle happens remains invisible, unseen. And that is how it is with our giving. What our giving achieves is visible in the sacred space, ministry and mission of our churches. What remains invisible and unseen is the grace that transforms the heart of the giver, the inner blessing and breaking of all that is entrusted to us, the willingness to trust in God's provision.

Stewardship application

This is a story of contrasts: ministry and retreat, scarcity and abundance, hunger and plenty, the hidden and the visible. What story does our church tell? Is it a story of scarcity, a fearful story which constrains our vision of what is possible under God and makes our budgets, if we have them, an exercise in managing that scarcity? Or is it a story of abundance, of God's gifts given to us, blessed and broken and of our hands giving of what we have received? Are our churches characterized by the rich practice of hospitality which speaks of grace and gift received and shared?

We must also ensure that how we think and talk about money in church embraces not only the necessary disciplines of monetary transaction but also the vision of transformative generosity.

In this story the people are arranged in groups, ready to receive a miracle that has not happened. Are we organized for abundance so that our financial planning and our money talk are open to blessing, our budgets not fearful, our giving not guarded, nominal or begrudged?

None of this is to deny the very real financial challenges churches face. Sadly closure is sometimes inevitable and the challenge is to end its life faithfully and well having lived its life faithfully and well. Each church must maximize all the income streams at our disposal: rentals, grants, legacy income, Friends groups and fundraising and more. But we must also ensure that how we think and talk about money in church embraces not only the necessary disciplines of monetary transaction but also the vision of transformative generosity. Or, as theologian Walter Brueggemann puts it, we must abandon the myth of scarcity and instead celebrate a liturgy of abundance.

preaching notes
Mark 6:30-44

Recognising the rich diversity of our congregations stewardship preaching may wish to use some of the differentiated reflections and challenges below.

Leader

As they offer their gifts each week millions of Christians acknowledge that 'all things come from you, and of your own do we give you'. What we put in the offertory has first been given to us, blessed and broken. Are we grateful for the blessing that has been given to us? Are we generous with what has been given into our hands? Does our giving reflect the sacrificial giving of Jesus who was broken for us that we might be fed?

Jesus' response to his disciples was not to judge but to ask, 'what do you have?' And this is the starting point for our own stewardship journey.

Planned

There is a rhythm to stewardship as to so much in the Christian life. There is much in church life that is busy, there is much in day to day life that demands our time and attention. Good stewardship is not born in the busyness but in the willingness to step back, to think, to pray. So are we making time to pray about, to review, refresh and renew our giving?

Plate

'What is this among so many?' Faced with our own needs and the needs of those we love, with the needs of our church and perhaps those of charities we care for it is all too easy to feel powerless, frustrated, even angry. Jesus' response to his disciples was not to judge but to ask, 'what do you have?' And this is the starting point for our own stewardship journey. So what is the one single step that you can take today to give something and to give regularly so that God can meet needs in us and through us?

Mark 12:38-44
(NRSV)

Jesus Denounces the Scribes

38 As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

The Widow's Offering

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

Suggested readings
Haggai 1:1-11 ■ Romans 11:33-12:8

This well-known story offers two perspectives on our stewardship. The first perspective is personal, the spiritual discipline of generosity. The second perspective is prophetic, which is to say that good stewardship speaks against both injustice and poverty. [i]

The brief story of the Widow's Mite cannot be understood in isolation from the context in which Mark places it. Immediately prior to the story is Jesus' fierce denunciation of the scribes, the teachers of the Law, for their desire for public honour and their greed. However the widow's story also follows closely on the heels of Jesus' encounter with another scribe (Mk 12:28-34) who is treated sympathetically and said to be not far from the Kingdom.

Beware the teachers of the law

We are not dealing, therefore, with a blanket condemnation of religious leaders but rather with the surrender of some, perhaps many, to the gravitational pull of wealth and social esteem. Their 'flowing robes' (*stolais*) were used on festal occasions and the word is used in the Greek text of the OT to describe both priestly and kingly garments (Ex 28:2, 29:21, 31:10). By virtue of status the scribes could expect respectful acknowledgment by the populace as they moved through the economic life of the market whilst they also had a seats of distinction in the place of worship and enjoyed the social life of the wealthy. The Greek word for the special seat in the synagogue is p*rōtokathedrias* and in Mark's account it is neatly balanced by the reclining couch used at feasts which is the *prōtoklisias*.

The story reflects the honour conscious culture of Greek and Roman society which was familiar to Mark's readers but a far cry from the suffering Messiah and the discipleship to which he calls his followers.

The reference to banquets flows into the second criticism of the scribes, that of '*devouring* the houses of widows'. It is not clear what this means. It may be that scribes overcharged for their legal advice, that they seized property for the non-payment of tithes or that they abused the hospitality offered to them. A further suggestion is that the scribes were appointed to manage the estates of widows on the death of their husbands and were reaping financial rewards from doing so.

In any event, the contrast here is that of the widow, who along with the orphan in the Old Testament is entitled to protection over against the rapaciousness of the very religious leaders who had a duty of care (Jer 7:6; Ez 22:7; Mal 3:5; Zech 7:10). Now in the Old Testament the Levite is closely associated with the widow and orphan because the Levites owned no land, the source of sustenance and wealth. So the image of religious leaders seeking honour and wealth at the expense of widows is deeply shocking. Isaiah 10:1-4 may also be in the frame here with its reference to evil writs, documents that could come from a scribe. Mark sets the story of a widow's piety in the wider context of the biblical injunction to care for the needy and the prophetic challenge to those who practice injustice.

Jesus sat down

The fact that Jesus is described as sitting may have been a source of some controversy. It seems that some Rabbis believed that only the Davidic king could sit in the temple while others felt that not even the King could do so.

The Treasury normally refers to the temple storerooms which lay behind the walls of the inner court and were not accessible to lay people. For this reason the setting of this story is understood to be a room off the court of women in which there were 13 trumpet shaped receptacles for offerings of different types. There is no suggestion that Jesus' knowledge of the gifts being given was supernatural. It is possible that offerings were declared verbally to the priest and this is how Jesus knew what was given. Perhaps mention of the two small coins is intended to be symbolic of her offering in contrast to the public display of lavish generosity by the wealthy.

Mark sets the story of a widow's piety in the wider context of the biblical injunction to care for the needy and the prophetic challenge to those who practice injustice.

We should not miss the significance of Jesus observing the gifts as they were given. We sometimes speak of giving as a very private business, our business and no one else's. There is of course much truth in this observation although perhaps personal is a better word than private. But although our gifts are deeply personal that cannot be a refuge from accountability before God for the gifts that we make. Jesus positions himself to see what is given and the manner in which it is given.

Poor and rich

Mark paints a vivid linguistic picture. The 'crowd' throws in money, *chalkon*, which refers to copper coins. It is interesting to note in passing that in Luke's gospel Jesus sees only *rich* people and what they give is not 'money' but the more religious word, 'offerings'. Thus Luke strengthens the religious context of the story.

Mark knows the rich are there of course, because he notes that in the crowd 'many rich were casting in much'.[ii] By contrast to the crowd and the wealthy, Mark notes the presence of 'one widow', bluntly described as poor. Luke will change this to 'needy', although he retains the word poor on the lips of Jesus. Poor or needy, this

is not just about words. The material needs of the widow do not disappear from view because she gives generously. Her piety does not render her poverty meaningless or dismiss her entitlement to care, compassion and justice. She does not stop being poor or needy because she is generous. Rather her personal generosity speaks of the generosity of God while her status as poor widow remains a prophetic challenge to, 'act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). Good stewardship is not restricted to generous giving but must embrace the challenge of social justice, indebtedness, financial exclusion and financial capability.

This widow's gift is two *lepta* and the tense of the verbs Mark uses in his story matters. With reference to the crowd Mark says that they 'were throwing' - the imperfect, continuous past tense. But the widow 'gave' - a single point past tense (the aorist tense). Thus Mark contrasts the widow's one off gift with the showy repetitious giving of the rich. The word *lepta* is a Greek word which, it seems, denotes money of little value and this is the word translated by the traditional word 'mite'. To explain this Greek term to his readers Mark equates the two lepta with a *quadrans*, the least valuable Roman coin and which English bibles translate as worth a penny or a few pence.

Good stewardship is not restricted to generous giving but must embrace the challenge of social justice, indebtedness, financial exclusion and financial capability.

Sacrificial giving

Jesus calls his disciples to him, a Markan turn of phrase that denotes the start of some teaching. This widow has given 'as much as all' (*panta hosa*). This may mean she gave as much as the rest put together and the contrast of verbs just noted would support such a reading. But it may also mean that her gift was more generous than any of the individual gifts offered. Either way, the widow's gift is seen to be more generous than the richer, more frequent material offerings of the rest.

Good giving here is not about how much we give but from how much we give.

What is the stewardship principle here? These wealthy givers gave much but gave from their surplus, retaining enough to live and indeed to live well. By contrast the widow's gift has a sacrificial quality, coming not from her surplus but from that which she needs to live. The statement that she gave all she had is probably not to be taken literally. Rather it is an exaggeration to make the key point that she was giving from her means not her surplus. Good giving here is not about how much we give but *from* how much we give.

In short, there is affirmation here of the biblical principal of proportional giving. This is reflected in the Law of the Tithe (Deut 14:22-29) in which 10% of what we have is commanded as a gift. It is also affirmed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 16:1-2 where we are called to give in proportion to what we have received and in the encouragement to give from what we have, not from what we do not have (Dt 16:17, 2 Cor 8:12).

But the widow's gift invites us also to embrace sacrificial generosity. Our giving should be something that we notice, something that costs

us. There are not two conflicting principles here; it is simply that the percentage we give is not a fixed percentage regardless of income but a percentage that costs us something, that is sacrificial.[iii]

More than a generous gift

It has already been suggested that the story of the widow's generous gift is set against a wider biblical command to social justice. Some commentators go much further. For some the widow's gift is not an example of good giving but a mistake, evidence of the rapaciousness of the religious leaders and the oppressive burden of the Temple as religious institution. Far from praising her piety Jesus laments over a mistaken gift to a failing religious system.

Good giving is deeply personal and proportionate to what we have received. Each meaningful gift is a sacrament of gratitude and worship. But good giving is also prophetic in a world in which enough means just a little more.

Although this is too strong it is an important corrective to easy, personalized readings of the story. Personal giving, however generous, does not wholly discharge our duty of stewardship towards God. We cannot evacuate the story of any challenge to personal, sacrificial giving but nor can we reduce the act of giving to a personal, privatized act of spirituality. Good giving is a prophetic business which challenges those who would accrue wealth at whatever cost to other individuals and to society. The practice of generosity is subversive of a culture of greed and grasping. The generous giving of this widow is a prophetic challenge to the wealthy (and that is each of us) not only to give generously but also to practice justice and to live with integrity both in our personal lives and as we serve the institutional life of church as a spiritual Temple.

First fruits

We see something of these two perspectives, the personal and the prophetic, in the requirement to bring the first fruits found in Deuteronomy chapter 26. The Israelite brings the first fruits of the land with which he has been blessed in personal gratitude to the place of worship. There, before the priest, he offers the gift in the place of shared worship. He then recites an ancient creed, a statement of belief that retells the story of Israel's rescue from Egypt. The gift of first fruits is transformed from a personal act of gratitude to a confession of shared faith in which the land is not a private possession but the gift of God to all his people. It is the giftedness of this land which underpins the laws which will protect the poor from usury or interest, release them from debt and economic slavery and restores the land every fifty years.

Each meaningful gift reminds us that God is the ultimate owner and giver of all we have and this remembrance called Israel and calls us to practice social justice, to resist corruption and systemic greed.

Good giving is deeply personal and proportionate to what we have received. Each meaningful gift is a sacrament of gratitude and worship. But good giving is also prophetic in a world in which enough means just a little more. Each meaningful gift reminds us that God is the ultimate owner and giver of all we have and this remembrance called Israel and calls us to practice social justice, to resist corruption and systemic greed.

preaching notes

Mark 12:38-44

Stewardship application

Sir Moses Montefiore was once asked how much he was worth. Pausing for a moment Sir Moses spoke an amount of money. Surely he was more wealthy than that commented his questioner to which Sir Moses replied, *'You didn't ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I am worth. So I calculated how much I have given to charity this year. You see, we are worth what we are willing to share with others.'*

We cannot treasure this story as a self-serving justification of low level giving on the grounds that Jesus is more interested in the heart of the giver than how much we actually give. There is, of course, a significant measure of biblical truth in this statement. However, as someone has said, we can give the widow's gift only if we give with the widow's heart and we are on the widow's income. We cannot default on our stewardship responsibility to give in proportion to our income and justify it by an appeal to the heart. Our giving is a measure of our heart and what we give to others reveals our hearts. No gift, however, is ever a proxy for justice and righteous dealing with money and with other people.

Recognising the rich diversity of our congregations stewardship preaching may wish to use some of the differentiated reflections and challenges below.

Our giving is a measure of our heart and what we give to others reveals our hearts.

Leaders

Our personal commitment to generous giving cannot be divorced from our commitment to justice and righteousness around money. Our personal financial decisions, even our giving, do not take place in a vaccum. Giving is countercultural, a prophetic act. It challenges our personal preoccupation with wealth and calls us again and again to remember the poor and to act with justice in all our dealings.

Planned givers

The widow's gift was small in cash terms amount but it was entirely consistent with the condition of both her income and her heart. Can we say the same about our own giving? Does it reflect what we have been given and does it cost us something in the giving?

Plate givers

Is there a danger of driving a mental wedge between our talk of being generous and the gift that we actually give? Do we too easily talk of a generous attitude while actually giving a gift that is inconsistent with generous living?

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[i] There is some overlap in these notes with notes on Luke's version of this story found at the Preach Luke! tab

ii The force of Mark's writing is clear in the alliterative Greek text: *kai polloi plousioi eballon polla*.

iii This addresses the criticism that tithing is regressive, asking more of the poor than of the rich. For some tithing is a starting point in their giving not journey's end.

Mark 8:27-38
(NRSV)

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' 28 And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' 29 He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels'.

Suggested readings
Proverbs 21:1-8 ■ 1 Peter 4:7-11

This story is pivotal in Mark's Gospel as Jesus directly challenges his disciples to grasp the cost of discipleship, a cost he is soon to bear himself. The way of the cross invites us to relinquish our tight hold on the life we think we want if we are truly to live. This challenge is no less real in our discipleship practice of generous giving.

To paraphrase the football commentators, Mark is a gospel of two halves. The first half breathlessly follows the words and acts of Jesus' ministry; the second half is devoted to just the final weeks of Jesus' life. This passage, Peter's Confession and the teaching of Jesus on the way of the cross that follows, forms the watershed, the tipping point of the Gospel. All that has happened up to this point, the miracles, parables, teaching and the casting out of demons, are vectors that come to a focal point in this direct question, 'who do *you* say that I am?'

Who do you say that I am?

At the outset we note the interesting suggestion of Joel Marcus that Mark intentionally links our passage to the preceding miracle, the two stage healing of the man born blind. Marcus suggests that Peter's double movement of profound spiritual insight and instinctive resistance to a suffering messiah is paralleled in the half seeing, half blind man, noting both Jewish and Christian traditions that portray Satan and the demons as those who blind human beings.

Mark frames his account of Peter's confession and the prediction of the cross (8:27-33) with bookend verses referencing the opinions of 'men'. The passage opens with a question, 'who do people [literally,'men'] say I am?' and closes with the rebuke to Peter for thinking as the world and not with the mind of God. In between Peter has a moment of spiritual insight into who Jesus is but fails to grasp that the suffering of God's messiah is part of God's purpose and plan.

Our own discipleship bears the hallmarks of both insight and resistance. Often looking back and sometimes in the moment we recognise milestone moments of spiritual maturity and growth. But such moments are experiences alongside our blind spots, known and often unknown, and our no-go areas for discipleship. Life is lived out in the tension between our desire for the things of God, our ambivalent desire for our human flourishing and our capacity for sinful self-serving. Such ambiguity is the canvas on which

the discipleship challenge to faithful stewardship and grace filled generosity is painted.

The son of man must suffer

In 8:31 the words 'he began to teach' are important because Mark uses this verb (*ērxato*) to introduce a new movement or theme in his Gospel. This new theme is the suffering of the Messiah (see also 6: 2-3, 11:17-18). A feature of Mark's gospel is the so called messianic secret noted in the introduction to these notes. Now, at this pivotal point in Mark's gospel Jesus spells out precisely what it means to be the Messiah. He speaks openly to his disciples (the crowd is not in the frame until verse 34) of his impending rejection, suffering and death.

...we today are reminded that the way of the cross can be costly and sacrificial.

The suffering of the Messiah is no accident of human history. In v31 the English words '*must* suffer' do not carry the force of the Greek word Mark uses (*dei*) to convey the sense divine purpose lying behind the suffering of Jesus. This same word is used in 9:11, 13:7 and 13:10, and corresponds to the use of 'it is written' in 9:12 and 14:21. It is not simply that Jesus suffers, he does so in obedience to the will and purpose of God.

This is the first of three great suffering prophecies which dominate this section of the Gospel and illuminate Mark's theme of discipleship characterised by both insight and failure to understand and follow.[i] At 9:31 the second suffering proclamation is followed by the disciples arguing about greatness and at 10:33 the third suffering proclamation is followed by the disciples seeking places of honour at Jesus' side. Stories in this section include Jesus' challenge to easy, one sided divorce and, significantly for our specific purpose, the inability of a wealthy young man to meet the cost of discipleship by surrendering his wealth.

'Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

After each suffering prophecy the disciples fall short of the challenge to imitate their Master. In each generation readers of Mark's gospel recognise their own failings as they follow Jesus on the road. Mark's readers in Rome and we today are reminded that the way of the cross can be costly and sacrificial.

In his famous book *The Cost of Discipleship* the martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined the powerful phrase, 'cheap grace'. He defined cheap grace as, 'the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.' Cheap grace can be an institutional failing as well as a personal resistance to embrace a cost in discipleship.

He began to rebuke him

Talk of a suffering messiah is too much for Peter who takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter but before he does so, in v33, Jesus first turns and looks at his disciples. This

may suggest that Jesus knew that the other disciples shared Peter's objection or possibly that the force of Peter's challenge to Jesus could unsettle the disciples' uncertain grasp of this challenging new teaching. Either way, Jesus directly confronts a contagious narrative of cheap grace, of discipleship without cost. The verb 'rebuke' (*epitiman*) used here by both Peter and Jesus is used elsewhere in Mark of the demons in 1:25, 9:25, the storm that threatened the disciples in 4:39, of those who tried to silence Bartimaeus and those whom the disciples mistakenly rebuked for bringing children to Jesus.

The challenge to costly discipleship applies to what we do with our money. How could it be otherwise? How could the discipleship challenge to obedience and cost be pertinent in every area of life save our money when money considerations are rarely far from the moral choices and discipleship decisions we take each day? And the invitation to generosity and other aspects of financial stewardship can elicit extremes of response and opinion. More than one church council member has expressed incredulity that the congregation is being asked to give more. More than one has told and retold the story that no one has any more to give which infects the rest of the leadership. More than one church council has mistrusted the intentions of the denominational body when financial matters are discussed.

The challenge to costly discipleship applies to what we do with our money.

Partly this is because, like Peter, our best intentions and pastoral concerns are entwined inseparably with our resistance to the cost of discipleship. Partly it is because of the ambiguous nature of money. As Bonhoeffer observed, 'earthly possessions dazzle our eyes and delude us into thinking that they can provide security and freedom from anxiety. Yet all the time they are the very source of anxiety'. Both individuals and congregations must wrestle with what it means to be a good steward of ambiguous money and, as Paul puts it, aspire to 'excel in the grace of giving'.

...our best intentions and pastoral concerns are entwined inseparably with our resistance to the cost of discipleship.

The plain fact is that we must resource the ministry needs of our church primarily, though not at all exclusively, through generous giving. Some individuals, some churches, rise to this challenge and embrace the cost. They blend the careful cultivation of the various strands of church income with a commitment to nurturing regular, planned, committed giving by the congregation. Some resist such discipleship responsibility, take refuge in their sense of entitlement or retell a story in which the blame for their predicament lies outside of themselves. Jesus resisted Peter's narrative of discipleship without cost. The situation will change from church to church and the needs in one place are very different from those in another. But with sensitivity to where God has called us a mature stewardship ministry will resist a story which deflects the challenge to generous giving by pleading scarcity or attributes blame for our predicament outside of ourselves.

preaching notes

Mark 8:27-38

Get back in your place

'Get behind me, Satan!' This is pretty strong to our ears but the force of the rebuke should not be overstated. Although our English bibles use different words the words 'behind me' (*opisō mou*) are used again in very next verse as a positive description of discipleship: 'if anyone desires to follow *after* (= *behind*) me …'. So the rebuke is not a rubbishing of Peter but is perhaps better read as an invitation to Peter to take his place behind Jesus as a disciple and not stand in Jesus' way on the road to Jerusalem.

Not just for the few

Thus far Jesus has been talking to his disciples but in verse 34 the crowd is intentionally brought into play. The phrase 'he called the crowd to him' uses the same verb (*proskalesamenos*) as Mark used for the initial calling of the Twelve in 3:13, their sending out in 6:7 and again in 8:1. Perhaps Mark is suggesting here a fresh invitation to follow Jesus, renewed in the light of this new teaching about the way of the cross, to both the Twelve and the crowds. In any event, it is the crowd and not just the disciples who are called to costly discipleship.

...in stewardship no Christian can stand detached from the need to resource the life and ministry of their church or from the invitation to give and live generously.

This challenge to the crowd is relevant to stewardship and church life today. A small number in each congregation give a disproportionate amount of the income in a church and often of the voluntary time offered to the church. But while it is a well-known feature of church life (and indeed charitable giving as a whole) it should not be like this. There is not one class of disciples called to live sacrificially and another exempt from this vocation. And in stewardship no Christian can stand detached from the need to resource the life and ministry of their church or from the invitation to give and live generously.

The way of the cross

Verses 34-38 pack a punch in the form of a series of short sayings which are carefully structured by Mark. The programmatic verse is v34 with its vivid picture, all too familiar for Mark's original readers, of carrying the cross as a model for discipleship. Now Mark alone of the gospels includes a reference to, 'for my sake and *the gospel*'. The other occurrence of this is in Mark 10:29-30; in view there is the loss of family and, significantly for our reading of this passage, fields which constituted the most abiding wealth in Jesus day.

Verses 35-38 unpack the meaning of this primary verse, each beginning with and linking back to v34 by the word 'for' - it is clearer in the Greek than in our English translations. The two verbs 'renounce' and 'take up' are both *past* (aorist) tense verbs while the verb 'let him follow' is a *present* tense imperative. Discipleship involves both the decision to start a journey and that ongoing commitment to keep moving. The challenge of v35 is stark: to try to cling on to life is to lose it. True life is only found in the obedience which is willing to accept cost and sacrifice.

Discipleship around money becomes explicit in verses 36-37 in

which the language of gaining and losing comes from the world of commerce. The verse is informed by Psalm 49:7-12 with its reference to those who trust in the abundance of their riches only to die and leave wealth to others. But the Greek word for life here, *psyche*, can also mean 'soul' and speaks of more than just physical loss. The industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie touched on this when he wrote, 'he who dies rich, dies disgraced'.

At the end of their book T*he Paradox of Generosity*[ii] Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson write this: 'generosity is paradoxical. Those who give their resource away, receive back in turn. In offering our time, money, and energy in service of other's well being, we enhance our own well being as well ….. By clinging to what we have, we lose out on higher goods we might gain. By holding on to what we possess, we diminish its long term value to us…. In short, by failing to care well for others, we actually do not properly take care of ourselves'.

...by failing to care well for others, we actually do not properly take care of ourselves.

Verse 38 uses the language of shame, language that would resonate more powerfully with Mark's first readers than it might for us today. Yet there is a twist. In the OT it is God who brings people to shame but here Jesus will 'be ashamed' of those who deny him. The verse is a powerful appeal to stay faithful in a hostile world. In its own way our consumer culture is just such an environment in which the seduction of wealth and the treadmill of work and acquisition can easily displace contentment, generosity and gratitude as the reference points for living well with wealth.

Stewardship application

600 years ago Copernicus looked at the stars with his naked eye (the telescope would not be invented for another 100 years) and rediscovered the lost truth that the earth orbited the sun yearly and spun on its axis daily. His findings, published in *De Revolutionibus* in 1530, would be challenged, as would those of Galileo a hundred years later.[iii]

At the centre of financial discipleship is our willingness to relinquish our pride of ownership and to receive what we have as a gift from God.

We find the same resistance to thinking differently and the same desire to keep ourselves at the centre of our own universe in our attitudes to wealth. Our hearts and the society insist that it is all about me. 'I know about wanting more' says businessman Edward Lewis in the film Pretty Woman, 'I invented the concept'.

The words of Jesus in this passage challenge us to put our lives in orbit around that which truly gives life and this is no less true of our financial lives. At the centre of financial discipleship is our willingness to relinquish our pride of ownership and to receive what we have as a gift from God. It is, says Jesus, in this letting go that we find true life.

The joyful discipline of generous giving is a symbol, we might even say it has a sacramental nature, of that letting go of our pride of ownership. But generous giving is also the primary spiritual discipline by which we do that work of relinquishing our pride of ownership and receiving what we have as a gift. Or, to use other words, we are

preaching notes
Mark 8:27-38

we are invited with Peter to think not with the mind and passion of the world but with that of God himself.

It is hard to hear the discipleship call to obedience, to a generosity in which we find not loss but gain, not sorrow but joy, not scarcity but abundance.

invited with Peter to think not with the mind and passion of the world but with that of God himself.

This word about costly discipleship around money is hard to hear. Like a badly tuned radio our consumer culture creates a great deal of background noise! TV, internet, billboard and lifestyle magazines all tell us what the good life looks like. It is hard to hear the discipleship call to obedience, to a generosity in which we find not loss but gain, not sorrow but joy, not scarcity but abundance.

Recognising the rich diversity of our congregations stewardship preaching may wish to use some of the differentiated reflections and challenges below.

Leaders

Do we need a Copernican type revolution in how we think about giving? What does our giving say about who is truly at the centre of our lives? When it comes to giving - how we give and how much we give - do we think with the mind of God or of the world?

Planned

Jesus teaches in this passage that if we hold tight to what we have we lose it; if we let go of what we have we gain the life of the kingdom. So what makes us hesitate to let go and give more generously? What are our points of resistance? What makes it hard for us to refresh our giving? What is the hard word of Jesus that might rebuke us and thus invite us to a renewed discipleship?

Plate

Think of a badly tuned radio; how difficult it is to hear the words or music clearly. Our consumer society shouts loudly about the good life even if we struggle for the basics. It makes it hard for us to hear the invitation to give regularly to support the ministry and mission of our church. So what act of commitment can we make? How can we connect the life of our church to that of our purses, wallets and bank accounts?

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[i] Intriguingly within this section of the Gospel Jesus and his disciples are 'on the road' to Jerusalem although the destination is not actually firmly stated until 10:32ff. On the road but not there yet is not too shabby a metaphor for discipleship

[ii] OUP 2015, page 224

[iii] On this see *Christian Stewardship for the 21st Century: Lessons from Copernicus* by Dan R. Dick

Mark 12:28-34
(NRSV)

The First Commandment

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' 29 Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' 32 Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; 33 and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Suggested readings
Deuteronomy 15:7-11 ■ James 1:19-27

In this passage we are challenged to love God with all that we are. God created us with physical bodies and material needs so living well and loving God with our wealth and possessions is inevitably part of both human flourishing and Christian discipleship.

This passage in Mark is the culmination of three skillful questions put to Jesus by the religious authorities in order to trap him. The first question challenged the authority of Jesus to act as he did and his effective riposte is the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. The second is a kind of 'third rail' political question about paying taxes to Caesar and the third a religious debate about marriage and life after death. A fourth question is considered here: which commandment is the most important?

Some questions are genuine questions seeking an answer. Some are asked, as above, with the intent to trap Jesus into taking sides. And some questions, however real, are inadequate to the mystery that the question explores. This question asked by a scribe, in Mark's gospel at least, is both a real question and one that addresses a mystery that is beyond human comprehension. In Mark's gospel this particular teacher of the law is presented sympathetically by comparison with other passages (1:22, 2:6-7; 3:22, 7:1-13). By contrast, Luke's account is less sympathetic. The initial question from the Scribe is asked in order to test Jesus and the supplementary is to justify himself, thus leading into the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The first commandment

Mark's writing style is characterized by a certain raw and urgent style. In this passage Mark conveys something of the scene in the piling up of participles: 'having come forward', 'having heard them reasoning with Jesus', 'having seen how well he answered'. The teacher asks about the first (*prōtē*) commandment and the word 'first' carries the connotation of 'most important'. It was indeed a question the scribes debated: is one aspect of the Law more important than others, even equal to the combined weight of the rest? By way of illustration, Rabbi Hillel was challenged by a gentile to teach him the whole law while standing on one foot. He replied, 'that which you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole law; the rest is commentary'.

In reply Jesus quotes from the Shema, the Jewish declaration of faith

found in Dt 6:4-5, so called after the first word of passage, *sema*, hear! Some commentators note that according to the Mishnah, the written compilation of rabbinic teaching, the Shema was said daily in the Temple alongside the Ten Commandments, the Temple being the setting for this encounter in Mark's gospel. The Shema is, of course, essentially a reflection of the first of the Ten Commandments, to love the God of Israel.

Interestingly, although Matthew and Luke use Mark's account as their source both omit the first part of the Shema, quoting only Dt 6:5 and the command to love God with all that we are. But Mark retains the first part of the Shema which is not a command but a declaration: the Lord God is One. This is not accidental; the scribe will use these same words in his response to Jesus, again found only in Mark, in verse 32.

...we are commanded to love because God is love and gives himself to us in love in creation and in Christ.

This is neither a technical note nor a detached observation! Any command from God about how we should live will always arise out of the nature of God himself. There is a why before the what. Here we are commanded to love because God is love and gives himself to us in love in creation and in Christ. Indeed, as if they are bookends, Leviticus 19:18 which is quoted as the second commandment ends with a further declaration, 'I am the Lord'.

...to give generously is rooted ultimately in the grace and giving of God himself. To be sure, such giving will resource the ministry of our church and sustain our buildings as sacred spaces in our communities.

Accordingly, the gospel injunction to give generously is rooted ultimately in the grace and giving of God himself. To be sure, such giving will resource the ministry of our church and sustain our buildings as sacred spaces in our communities. But the heart of generosity is the generosity of God towards us. This is what Paul has in mind when in 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 he roots both the generous giving of the Macedonian church and the challenge to generosity in Corinth in the grace of Jesus himself.

With all that we are

Now it gets a little complex at this point! The Hebrew text of the Shema has only three elements: heart (*kardias*), soul (*psyche*) and power (*dunameōs*). The words of Jesus in Mark retain heart and soul, replace power with the word 'strength' (*ischuos*) and further adds the word, 'mind' (*dianoias*). And if that is not enough, to complicate matters a tad further in his response the scribe replies with just three phrases in which both heart and strength are retained but in which mind (*dianoias*) is replaced by understanding, (*suneseōs*).

The reasons for these different words need not concern us. One possible explanation, it seems, is the different translations of the Hebrew original in the Greek version of the OT. The key thing to note is that this passage shines, as it were, four floodlights on what it means to act, think and feel as a human being. There is a different emphasis in each word. For example, in Jewish thought the heart is not the seat of emotion as we might say but the seat of human will and decision making. But it is a mistake to try to press each word too hard and explore a particular aspect of human life. The phrase

'the whole of…' (*ex holēs*) is used four times over – the whole of your heart, the whole of your strength and so on. It conveys a sense of fullness and of that which arises, our thoughts and actions and convictions, from the inner life of a person.

The second is this

The Scribe had asked only about the first, most important commandment but Jesus adds, uninvited, a second: love your neighbour as yourself.[i] This is a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18, a verse quoted also in Galatians 5:14 and Romans 13:8-10 as a summary of the law.

In what sense is this the 'second' commandment? Does it mean the second most important in rank order? Or does it mean, as we might say today, that this is the other side of the coin, a command inseparable from the first. Or to nuance this further, does it mean that this second command is organically derivative from the first. It cannot stand on its own but the first command organically generates the second. Joel Marcus suggests that as the Ten Commandments were traditionally received on two tablets the phrasing here reflects that division. The love of God is a summary of the first four commands; love of one's neighbour a summary of the remaining six.

...there is no love for God which does not embrace and issue in love for one's neighbour.

In any event, one thing is clear: there is no love for God which does not embrace and issue in love for one's neighbour. The love of God, received and extended by us cannot be contained in a privatised spirituality that knows nothing of compassion, community, respect and justice. As E Schweizer comments, 'it is impossible to keep the first commandment unless one lives according to the second…. Love for God is the first thing that will be revealed by love for one's neighbour'.

Well said teacher

The scribal response in v33 is interesting in that it is the only Gospel account of a teacher of the law agreeing with Jesus. As if he had just read these notes the Scribe conflates the two commands into a single command linked by the verb 'is'. Further he affirms the unity of God in the first part of the Shema and adds a common OT phrase, 'and there is no other but him' (compare Ex 8:10; Dt 4:35; Isa 44:6).

...God is the ultimate source and object of our love which is expressed tangibly in our love for those with whom we live.

Luke's account of this story moves to answer the self-justifying question, 'who is my neighbour?' For Mark the focus seems to be that the Scribe affirms that God is the ultimate source and object of our love which is expressed tangibly in our love for those with whom we live. And this love in action is more important than 'burnt offerings', those rules, rituals and religious practices, however much they may help to sustain our faith.

From a stewardship perspective this command to love God and neighbour is a profound challenge to look beyond our inherited traditions of 'the collection', the fundraising events and the need to balance the church books. Each of these of course has value

but unless they are infused by love of God and neighbour they are amongst our modern burnt offerings. Our giving must ultimately be motivated by love, modelled by our leaders and meaningful both in terms of our own income and the ministry needs of our church. Our giving is part of our worship and the offertory should be a living part of our liturgy which embraces the electronic giving of our 'first fruits' (Dt 26:1-11) by standing order or direct debit.

The invitation of grace

But Mark's story ends in v34 not with the response of the Scribe but with Jesus' comment that the scribe is not far from the Kingdom. Grammatically this closes off the story. Mark's narrative begins with the scribe seeing that Jesus answered well and ends with Jesus affirming that the scribe answered intelligently (*nounechōs*). This, along with the words of the Scribe changing 'all your mind' to 'all your understanding' is surely significant.

Our giving must ultimately be motivated by love, modelled by our leaders and meaningful both in terms of our own income and the ministry needs of our church.

Now to say that our giving must be motivated by love, or to read that God loves a cheerful giver does not mean we are rooting good giving in our human emotion. If we wait until we feel loving and joyful about giving our money away we could be waiting an awfully long time! This is why those elements of heart, soul, mind and strength are so important. Good giving is a matter of obedience, thoughtfulness and decision making; it is not just about our feelings. And that is why regular, planned giving is so important. We make an informed decision that is aware of the ministry needs of the church. We make an obedient decision that wrestles with the invitation of scripture to generous living. We make a heartfelt decision that responds in love to the love that God has shown to us and extends that love in tangible form to those in need.

The scribe is not far from the kingdom. Like the rich ruler in Mark chapter ten, there is more he needs to do. But if God is the source and object of love then his next step is not a command to observe Law but the invitation of grace to receive grace. It begs for each of us a very simple but profound question. At this time, perhaps especially in Lent, what next step is the grace of God inviting me to take that will help me 'excel in the grace of giving'?

Good giving is a matter of obedience, thoughtfulness and decision making

God, neighbour and self

In their reflective notes Francis and Atkins suggest three perspectives on this passage.[ii] Some of us will find here a single, overarching command to love, pure and simple. Some of us will find here two organically related commands, to love God and one's neighbour for we cannot say that we love God if we do not love our sister and our brother (1 John 2:9-11). Some of us will discover three interconnected commands: to love God, love our neighbour and love ourselves. This last is not the necessary precondition of all other loving for that would distort the thrust of Mark's story. But impaired self-love may distort our love of God and neighbour either by neglecting our own needs or making them our primary focus.

Stewardship application

The author recalls a retired archbishop telling how he witnessed a priest in his diocese praying the following prayer at the offertory: 'no matter what we say or do, this is what we think of you'. These were not, the archbishop observed, the formal words of the liturgy! Nonetheless, they captured something of what the offertory is all about. Money and material possessions are essential to human survival and they are part of our extended self, how we live and define ourselves in the world. As such how we live with and give away our money is a defining part of loving God with all that we are.

Amy Carmichael famously said that we can give without loving but we cannot love without giving. Birthdays, anniversaries and celebrations have taught us that, as has our instinctive generosity at times of loss and tragedy. As Christian Smith observes, 'when generosity is embraced as a way of life, people increasingly live into the reality of what it means to be human, a fuller and truer sense of who human beings are and what we are capable of'.[iii] To withhold the gift of generosity from discipleship is to withhold a crucial part of who we are before God.

Recognising the rich diversity of our congregations, stewardship preaching may wish to use some of the differentiated reflections and challenges below.

Money and material possessions are essential to human survival and they are part of our extended self, how we live and define ourselves in the world. As such how we live with and give away our money is a defining part of loving God with all that we are.

Leaders

When we give generously we honour God in worship with the first fruits of all he has given to us. Our giving must see beyond the material needs of the church building and the costs of ministry; important indeed but not, as this passage puts it, the most important things. We are to love with understanding and discernment: to know that good giving is our response to the goodness of God, that grace filled giving is our response to the grace of God, that sacrificial giving is our response to the giving of Christ (2 Cor 8:9).

Planned

When we give generously we love our neighbour because each gift on the offertory plate or from our bank account is a life affirming gift which makes possible the ministry and mission of our church. Our regular planned giving sustains our churches as sacred places and underwrites both ministry and mission in congregation and community. And where there is a common purse or fund between churches this enables wealthier churches to ensure gospel ministry in other parts of the wider community.

Plate

When we give generously we do something for ourselves! Of course we don't give to bless ourselves or to force God to bless us. But to give is to release ourselves from the entrapment of a consumer culture, from the subtle and seductive claims of money on our hearts. To begin to give in a regular, committed manner is the beginning of a joyful journey to which many can testify.

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[i] By way of a humorous aside, the author is reminded of the observation of WH Auden that we are put on earth to help others - what on earth the others are here for I do not know!

[ii] Exploring Mark's Gospel by Leslie J Francis and Peter Atkins (Continuum 2002)

[iii] The Paradox of Generosity page 226 (OUP 2015)