

“May I speak in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen”

Sermon for Sunday 1st March 2020

Welcome to the first of two Stewardship Sundays here at All Saints’, and thank you to Father Greg for agreeing to let me speak to you today to explain a bit about Stewardship and Planned Giving, about what our Stewardship Committee does, and about what we are asking you to do.

Before I move on to talk about Stewardship and Planned Giving, I’d like to reflect a little on the fact that we are at the first Sunday in Lent. In fact I’d like to take you back in your minds four days to Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent.

On Ash Wednesday the theme of the service was penitence and reconciliation with God. The solemnity of ashing reminded us that we have been formed from the dust of the Earth, and that our bodies shall return to that state. Our prayers of repentance reminded us how far we have strayed from God’s ideal plan for us. Ash Wednesday brings us into Lent thinking about how we can be closer to God – by fasting, or giving up something from our daily lives, we gain space in our lives and sharpen our sense of being closer to God; and by taking up an act of devotion, such as private prayer, daily Bible reading or gathering together weekly for Quiet Prayer we can use that space in our lives to deepen our relationship with God.

In today’s Gospel, we hear how Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. I find that an interesting phrase, “Jesus was led by the Spirit”. It’s not saying that he was forced to go into the wilderness. The Spirit led, and Jesus followed. Neither is it saying that Jesus went wilfully into the wilderness to prove that he was better than other people. The Spirit called, and Jesus responded.

While Jesus was in the wilderness, as we know, he was tempted. There are three temptations recorded in Matthew’s gospel:

- first, the temptation to turn stones to bread, to put an end to his hunger
- second, the temptation to throw himself from the parapet of the Temple. This wouldn't have been self-destructive in Jesus' case – it would have dramatically called attention to who He was, but it would have harmed his relationship with God by putting it to the test
- third, the temptation to seize worldly power. Jesus rejects this temptation – it is fundamental to Jesus to worship God and serve Him alone, and as we know, it would not have been serving God's plan for Jesus to take power in a worldly way. To have done so would not have brought people willingly and lovingly to God, and there would have been no atonement for our sins. God's plan was far better, a divine grace available to us all which Saint Paul describes as an abundant free gift.

Each time Jesus is tempted, He responds with a teaching from Scripture. He knows why He is resisting the temptation, and is confident because of Scripture of what the right thing to do is.

How are we to respond to Jesus' example?

We need to make God the first priority in our lives. We are to have no other gods except Him: our time, money and talents are there to serve Him. When we prioritise giving our time, money and talents to Him before anyone and anything else, we acknowledge his supremacy.

This brings me back to the topic of Stewardship – the name we give to 'Stewarding' the gifts back from the people of God in response to God's abundant free gift to us. People want to give back to God by giving of their time, money and talents. The Bible encourages us to give. We are not forced to give, but we do so as a loving response to God's calling. The general Biblical principle is called 'tithing', which means giving one tenth, or ten percent. The Church of England teaches that half of that tenth, which is 5%,

should be given to the Church and the other 5% be given in other Christian charity.

In this Parish, we have many generous givers, so to co-ordinate the gifts of money to the Church we have a committee. The committee meets regularly during the year to monitor the situation and report to the PCC. My role is to chair the committee. Chris Richards, one of our Church wardens, has the role we call Recorder. It is Chris who keeps the confidential records of giving, and from that to estimate how much will be received. Chris also reclaims Gift Aid from the government four times a year on the gifts that are covered by a Gift Aid declaration. Emily Crowson is our Secretary, recording minutes of meetings and helping prepare the information packs which we produce each year. Father Greg, Deirdre Welham and Isobel Bird are ex-officio members of the committee. Also on the committee are David Dickinson and Gordon Webster.

It helps the Church enormously to plan in advance how much money will be received from our givers, which is why we use the term Planned Giving to refer to the regular gifts that people tell us they plan to make each year. The two main ways of Planned Giving are bank transfer and envelope. There are forms available to join up to Planned Giving and I'd encourage you, if you haven't received a form, to ask one of the committee for one or take one from the carousel in the foyer. I'm well aware that many people also give generous donations during the year in response to specific appeals. For all your gifts, planned and unplanned, please accept our thanks.

How is the money which we receive used? In the first instance, bank transfers go directly into the Church's bank account and become available funds to meet the Church's outgoings. Envelope gifts are collected on the plate at the Sunday services and banked with other plate collection money on a weekly basis. By telling the Treasurer what to expect coming into the account each

week and each month, it helps her to keep track of the relatively large number of transactions on the account.

Each year we raise the topic of Planned Giving by making it the focus of one or two Sunday services, usually around this time of year. It's a chance to remind people why we give, to encourage ourselves that we are all giving to support the Church and God's mission, and to thank people for what they have given.

This year, we asked some members of the congregation if they would be willing to tell us why they tithe.

[At this point various testimonies are given, followed with ...]

You may feel God is calling you to give in more than one way – the important thing is to listen to God, and make your response to Him.