Stepney Area Conference

Generosity

*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.*

*I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written,*

*‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’*

*But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you that I myself have. For he not only accepted our appeal, but since he is more eager than ever, he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming of the good news; and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill. We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of others. And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters, but who is now more eager than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. Therefore, openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you. (2 Corinthians 8)*

About eighteen months ago, when I had just become your bishop, I went to my first deanery chapter. There was a big, warm welcome, lovely food, time to pray and be prayed for. It was great. There were lots of new faces to take in, and detail about individual churches and clergy that I was trying hard to remember, and much of which I can’t quite recall. But what I do remember really vividly is a conversation about the portable, collapsible baptism pool. I think it belongs to one of the Tower Hamlets churches – perhaps St Anne’s – but it had been borrowed by another church and was needing to be returned because it was then going to be used by another. There was a little anxiety about exactly where it was, and how it was going to be transported, but the flavour of the conversation was one of generosity. Tower Hamlets churches span the full range of Anglican tradition. What struck me listening in at the chapter meeting on that ordinary and practical conversation was that, although churches across Stepney area are hugely theologically diverse, they are also absolutely generous. When it comes to something as fundamental as baptism, then it’s one Lord, one faith, one baptism (pool). Just make sure you bring it back in time for its next outing.

In baptism, we mark and celebrate our belonging in God. God’s love for us is already assured, but in the new life of baptism we recognize that everything changes because of that love. We spend the journey of our lives trying to understand how God’s love inspires us to behave differently and how our character can be shaped by following the example of Jesus. For example, we might learn, as generations have done before us, the importance of the ten commandments, but we will also learn from listening to Jesus’s teachings that the first two of these – loving God and loving our neighbour – are primary and change all the others. In Christ, we are reborn, and life is redefined: we learn to navigate not by law but by love.

However we express our faith, whatever our styles of worship, whatever debates or differences we might experience in our shared church life in Stepney Area, we are all joined together through baptism. We are caught up in the story of God’s love, a love which is infinitely generous. And in response, we are learning to shape our lives generously, charitably, around the person and example of Jesus Christ.

I began to wonder out loud with you on Monday what that might look like in the current time, and in particular what it will look like to those who are coming to faith now, in the aftermath of a pandemic, and seeking to be schooled in the ways of faith. I was reflecting on how church communities can be schools of life, where we work out together how to live well with God and each other, and how this might play out in our lives in Islington, Hackney, and Tower Hamlets.

Today, I want to think about one particular attribute – which we could call charity, or generosity, or perhaps just simply love. I want to reflect on how we can best live this love together as Christians in Stepney area, knowing that we are united in our common baptism and that we all long for every Londoner to know the love of God in Jesus Christ. I want us to think how we will need to act together to make space for the many life explorers who have encountered faith through online worship and groups during the many lockdowns of the last year. As each one chooses to accept God’s gift of love in Jesus Christ, and as each one considers stepping into the Tower Hamlets (or Hackney or Islington) baptism pool, wherever that might have been set up, how can we help to school them in life? Who do we need to be, so that they too can become characters in God’s story? How do we need to be reborn, so that they can be reborn too? How can we join together to tell the story of God’s love for a broken and aching world?

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul tells of the grace of God that has been granted to the churches in Macedonia, and of the generosity of their giving despite their own great poverty. His words are intended to inspire the church in Corinth to follow through in their acts of repentance and to make a collection for suffering Christians in Jerusalem. What has happened in Macedonia is a pretty amazing turnaround: despite terrible ordeals, they have overflowed in abundance. What Paul wants the Corinthians to hear, though, is not just that the Macedonians have given, but that they have given beyond their means and in a way that he hopes might spill over yet further and influence the Corinthians: “so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.”

At the heart of generosity is love. In the words of thanksgiving at the offertory, all things come from you and of your own do we give you. However we choose to live out our generosity in Stepney, we will first need to give ourselves to God.

Paul’s words to the Corinthians reach into our current context and have set me thinking about what generous, collaborative mission looks like in Stepney churches today. If love comes first, and if love for those who haven’t yet heard the good news is a priority, then in our church communities we will need to be teaching, praying, and enacting generosity. I think that this includes not being proprietorial about what is ours. It means seeing things as gift not possession and seeing things through the lens of love rather than just the lens of law. I love our parish system, and what I love about it is that everyone belongs in it; no one is excluded, whatever their faith background or beliefs. What I don’t find helpful is when it becomes a way of building fences.

Let me be specific. In Stepney area we have several Bishop’s Mission Orders and they have been truly innovative in finding ways to reach new disciples. Because they are a new way of being church, they will have unsettled things, ruffled a few feathers perhaps. It doesn’t surprise me that that has sometimes felt uncomfortable, and I would expect there to have needed to be extra time and care spent in generous conversations and relationship building between different leaders and congregations. But what needed to follow next, and what certainly needs to follow now, is that any concerns about territory and missional reach are put aside. If a new congregation is being planted, and the best location for that new congregation to meet is, say, in a local school in a Stepney parish, then, with appropriate courtesies, that needs to be able to happen. There is no reason why that shouldn’t happen. On average 1% of our local population attends an Anglican Sunday service. That figure doesn’t tell the whole story of our engagement, but it does tell us something: that for every person who comes to our churches, there are 99 who don’t. As shepherds, we have to put the 99 first and focus our mission as generously, openly, and warmly as we can around those who are yet to accept the invitation to join with us in telling the story of God’s love.

In law it’s sometimes said that good fences make good neighbours. I don’t believe that’s true in church. Parishes were created to ensure that everyone is cared for, no one is left out, not to set a limit on the reach of God’s love. Generosity, as a reflection of divine love, is love which is always pushing the boundaries, whilst refusing to take centre stage. It is never about either my rights or my happiness. When we know the gift of love that is Jesus Christ, then we will want every fibre of our being to point towards receiving and passing on again that gift, never counting what we are owed, but always reckoning first what God has done for us.

I know that this can sound hard, especially in a culture which has over the last fifty years or so begun to devalue faith, and which has fragmented in ways that make traditional patterns of engaging with the Church of England break up. It is understandable that we are concerned about the effects of a pandemic first of all on people’s material wellbeing and then also on the health and viability of our own churches. But we do have a choice: either to respond in fear and succumb in our church life to the grasping individualism of our culture, or to look beyond the rules of self-interest, reject the economy of scarcity, and instead seek out God’s generous and abundant grace.

Of course, generosity needs to apply not only to hospitality around church planting, but also to our giving between churches through the Common Fund. In both, we need to contribute from our abundance, as Paul puts it (v 14), to enable mission.[[1]](#footnote-1) I urge you to choose love, and to practice generosity, not only because I believe it will help us to see the creative growth that we’ve named in our London 2030 Vision, but because to do so is to align our will with God’s love as we shape our common life together.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I’ve started by looking at how we form and grow our church communities around love, but I want us also to think for a moment about generosity in relation to growing in the depth of our discipleship. You will have your own patterns of preaching and teaching about stewardship, including generous giving, in your own churches. We all know that this is not about competing on the area stewardship spreadsheet: we give according to what we have, not what we don’t have, and God knows the generosity of our hearts in how we discern giving. I heard yesterday that one of our smaller churches had increased congregational giving by £20k in the last year. That really is the widow’s mite. I trust that you will carry on encouraging Christians in Stepney to continue to give generously – and that God will give us what we need to join with him in mission for this time and place.

I want to make two broader points about giving and confident discipleship. The first is about generosity and imagination. And the second is something about Christ’s solidarity with those who are poor.

We are stewards of some truly incredible assets in the Church of England. We have to steward those – whether in our leadership roles in parishes, our governance roles in this diocese, or perhaps our wider, representative roles and connections with the national bodies of the Church, including the Church Commissioners. There’s always a balance to be found in ensuring that the needs of today are responded to, and that assets are kept so that the needs of tomorrow can be catered for, and the Church can continue in its mission. We need imagination to see what the needs of the future might be and anticipate those in how we steward our resources. To do so isn’t storing up treasures for ourselves but is about tempering generosity with prudence.

However, where a generous approach to stewardship might make a difference now, is in our consideration of what kind of return we are looking for. Although it’s usual practice to seek a certain percentage financial return on our assets, a generous and imaginative response might make us look for something different. I am thinking especially of what we do with land assets and of the difficult decisions that parishes and dioceses have to make when getting involved in development work around affordable housing. We could take the traditional path and go for the maximum financial return, which will probably mean selling a high percentage of any development for profit. And we could justify that by saying that we are stewarding the assets of the church for future generations.

Or we could look for a different kind of return: one which seeks human, or social, good, for example by providing fair-cost housing for key workers and others living with poverty and inequality. It’s not that this doesn’t give a return: it does, but it gives a different kind of return. It potentially enables people to flourish and contribute to local community life, rather than detaching and destabilized them through debilitating commuting and insecure tenancies. I know that some of you already see the human costs of these sorts of financial equations and are pressing for principles of generosity to be applied in investment decisions.

I am sure that the debates will go on and I hope that local churches, supported by their diocese, and by the Church Commissioners, will be at the heart of them. But my simple point here is that being disciples of Christ means constantly enlarging our hearts, through prayer, to make space for the extraordinary abundance of God’s love for us. With the enlarging of our hearts has to go the enlarging our imagination, so that we can respond to the radical generosity and hospitality of God in radically generous and hospitable acts of our own. The returns, over time, as well as in the present moment, are communities which are shaped around God in order to point towards God’s kingdom. These are the legacies of love.

The third area to consider is what we are calling compassionate communities in the 2030 Vision. This is about generous love in action. 2 Corinthians 8:9 puts the generosity of Jesus on the cross at the heart of the love that we might show when coming to the aid of others: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

Charity is at the heart of who we are as a church: not a welfare activity that anyone could do, but part of our very being. It’s also at the heart of making disciples: not because we use charity to proselytize, but because acting generously expands our hearts and, we might hope, creates an example that will make others want to ask about the God whose love animates our lives. Every time we serve others we are being formed in solidarity with humankind and around the example of Jesus, who “took the lowest place in the world – the Cross – and by this radical humility [ . . . ] redeemed us and constantly comes to our aid.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

I believe that this kind of humble hospitality is deeply attractive to those who are exploring faith for the first time, including those seekers who have been inspired during the pandemic by their local churches’ commitment to feeding and caring for those in need. The young people who are stepping into the doors of our church buildings for the first time and asking now to be baptized are not only prompted by the great questions of life and death that sharpen during times of turmoil and loss; they are also drawn by the abundant, overflowing love of God expressed in countless acts of charity. Wanting to be further schooled in life, they are looking to us now to help them live in solidarity with humankind, modelling their lives around Jesus Christ.

Who do we need to be, that others will learn how to live well with God? What does the community of the baptized look like in Tower Hamlets, Hackney, and Islington? The golden thread of love -- generosity, charity, compassion – has run through our time together in this conference, as we’ve been encouraged to trust God’s loving kindness in our own lives, and as we’ve then reflected together on how to live this out together in discipleship, growth, and community engagement. At heart, we are simply to be Christ’s loving people. As Christ’s loving people, we will always be striving to live virtuous lives, which are grounded in goodness. Love isn’t just a feeling or a passing desire: it’s a commitment to living as charitably and as generously as we can, rooted and grounded in God.

In Philippians 4: 8-9, Paul sets up a model of Christian living which is about the *practice* of love.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

*Keep on doing*. These are important words. We practice. We fail. We forgive. We repeat. We need examples, mentors, companions to keep us learning in community, and to keep bringing us back to our commitment to love. Although all love is a gift, from God, which we can do nothing to earn, we can do everything to practice it and make space for it to dwell within us. We leave this conference, inspired, I hope, by all that our different speakers have offered, and grounded, I know, in the love of God that has been there for us since before the world began. I encourage us all to *keep on* shaping our lives and our churches so that we can continue to grow as God’s generous, image-bearing people, pointing always to the one who made us.

1. And see 2 Corinthians 8:15, quoting Exodus 16:18, “As it is written, ‘He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack'”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Jeremy Worthen: “The formation of our will takes place in love.” Responding to God’s Call: Christian Formation Today (London: Canterbury Press, 2012) REF? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pope Benedict, Deus Caritas Est, para 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)