

All Things In Common

There's a very apocryphal story about a longstanding Christian who died and was met at the gates of heaven by St Peter who welcomed him in and asked him to follow him to one of the "many mansions" that had been prepared for him. They walked along avenues lined with mansions and large houses, some occupied and others vacant, until they stopped outside a small garden shed. "This is yours" said St Peter. "That's not very mansion like," said the man, "why can't I have one of the empty properties that we've passed along the way?" "I'm ever so sorry," said St Peter, "but this is all we could do with the money you've sent us!"

OK, this is a reflection about giving but I need to make a couple of things clear right at the start, it's not about money and you certainly can't buy your way to heaven but there is something we can learn from this very fictitious anecdote.

This passage from Acts is a brief overview of early church life and the first sentence sets the tone for what follows... **All the believers were one in heart and mind.** Luke is describing the incredible sense of unity that the early believers felt, a unity that was so intense that it spilled over into the practical issue of possessions and giving, as the verse continues, **No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.**

What an extraordinary statement; how was this sharing actually carried out? Some have suggested that the early church was a communal society. That is, their homes and possessions were turned over to the church for common sharing and distribution but this is patently not the case as although we're told they met in each other's homes, there is no indication of them sharing their homes with others or handing their homes over to the church. In any case this is just a few weeks after Pentecost so there would not have been time to carry out the major restructuring necessary to rehouse the 8000+ people who had been saved on or immediately after Peter's address.

Others have suggested that the Christian church practiced socialism or even a form of communism where there was no private ownership, and possessions were shared by the group. And while it is true that they **had everything in common**, Luke's phrase, **No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own**, indicates what actually went on.

At the end of Acts chapter 2 we find a shorter description of this practice which also mentions how they sold possessions and goods to meet the needs of one another. Believers sold personal possessions to meet the needs of brothers and sisters, thinking that the value of their possessions were no longer reserved for their own ends, but for the common good of their new community.

Verses 34 and 35 describe how this actually worked out: **There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.**

Here we have major possessions. The believers did not hold a garage or chariot boot sale of used items they no longer wanted; they sold land and houses but not the very homes and property in which they lived or conducted business. If that were the case, the believers would have only been adding to the burden of the Christian community by creating housing problems. Luke is referring to the more affluent who owned extra property, or at least property that they no longer used and the key words are “**from time to time**”. The ownership of homes and possessions continued as normal because the believers were “**meeting in one another's houses.**”

The point Luke is making is that they regarded property as a means to serving the community. The believers did not regard themselves as generous, but as doing what loving family members do for one another. And to illustrate just how spontaneous the giving was the distribution system was initially overseen by the apostles who later admitted they had not had time to think through a system of administering these gifts and created seven Deacons to manage it.

So what can this passage teach us individually and as a church about giving?

First we need to have a giving mindset. The impression Luke gives us is that the early believers spontaneously gave to meet the needs of one another. The apostles are teaching but there is no record of them teaching about giving at this stage. It seems that giving rose more out of a natural mindset that they ought to be looking out for each other.

Experiencing the saving grace of Christ, should make us focus on our relationship others as well as God. As Christians we should become more, not less, aware of other people and their needs, which should generate a natural desire to give whatever we have the power to give. It may be money; it may be possessions; it may be time or just attention but we must be attentive to the needs of the church family.

How attentive are you? And I'm preaching to myself here! Do we know the needs of the church? Do we pay attention to the PCC minutes which show how well giving is meeting its budget? Do we know the people who are on their own in the church and their needs? Do we know the families in the church, the names and needs of their children and the help their families could use? Do we get beyond the "Hi! How's it going?" greeting and try to find out what how our brothers and sisters really are doing? Giving starts with caring enough to want to know the needs.

Second, we need to give generously. That is clearly the trait Luke is bringing out in his description of the early church. That sentence in 2:45 — ***Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need*** — is not the description of a people who looked through their loft and garages to offload what they had no longer any use for.

So how much is generous? It is difficult to set a standard, but I recently read one which resonates with me. **When the world - your unbelieving friends and neighbours - begin to question your judgment, you're probably reaching the generous stage!** However, we have to be careful and listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit rather than just respond to emotional appeals by good causes, a response more often born out of guilt rather than love.

Third, we need to give because we're family. That is what is meant by verse 32: ***All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.*** Like the early believers we ought to feel united to one another, not simply recognise that we hold the same beliefs. We ought to feel that we belong to the family of Christ, and that we belong here, to Hertford St Andrew, to St Mary's Hertingfordbury, the Zoom community and therefore to each other.

That's hard to do. It is hard enough in a family. How much more difficult then to feel a unity and belonging in a church where people come and go, come from different backgrounds, have families of their own and belong to other groups?

But if you want to feel closer to others in your congregation then give. I'm not talking about money here. Give hospitality: invite someone for coffee or for a meal. Give a mother some time out of the home; give a man help with a repair project; give a child some attention. You will then feel close and as you become closer you will start to appreciate their other needs and the ways in which you can help, some of which may involve money.

Finally we need to give out of the joy of our salvation. We give because of the grace of God working within us. However, we do not give in response to the grace of God.

I have heard it said that we ought to give out of gratitude for what God has done for us. After all, as He gave His Son for us, we ought to give something back to Him. But the early Christians did not give because they felt obliged to; they gave because of the joy of giving which came from the grace of God. True Christian giving is not paying God back for anything; not doing anyone any favours. It is joining in the joy for which God created us and Jesus Christ died for us.

In Ephesians 2 v 10 Paul tells us that ***We are created in Christ Jesus to do good works.*** What that means is that having accepted Christ as our saviour we should do what we were created by God to do - to glorify God through our service to him. It is not an obligation he places on us; it is a joyous privilege. God gives us the power to join in the activity which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit delight in doing themselves.

And that is why we remind ourselves each week to **"Go in peace to love and serve the world..."**

In the name of Christ, Amen.