

Chichester Cathedral
The Ninth Sunday after Trinity, 11.00am Sung Eucharist, 29 July 2018

In the days when he did stand-up comedy rather than films, Woody Allen sometimes ended his routine by taking a watch out of his pocket and checking the time. 'It's a family heirloom,' he'd explain, 'my grandfather sold it to me on his deathbed.' The joke works because there are occasions when the logic of buying and selling is out of place, and being on the threshold of death is one of them. When our mortality is staring us in the face, even in the most capitalistic society and business orientated family, market exchange seems inappropriate. What we want to do at that point is to give, to pass on, to share and to bless.

Our readings today give us a glimpse of a world in which giving is at the heart of all life, not reserved for our deathbed. A glimpse of a worldview it may be harder for us to grasp than for most of our forebears.

Take the first line of our first reading, from the second book of Kings: 'A man came bringing food from the first fruits to Elisha, the man of God'. The 'first fruits' refers to the sacrifice offered in thanksgiving for the annual crop. Because God is the creator of all that is, everything belongs to God. Therefore what is eaten, whether vegetable or animal, is a divine gift. Part of the gift must be offered back to God, and indeed it is the treating of food as a gift that will ensure it remains plentiful. Here is a worldview in which all the resources of our world are seen as a gift, and so not to be harvested and exploited solely for our own benefit.

The notion of 'first fruits' hardly exists now, outside of the pages of scripture, although perhaps the traditional Harvest festival is as close as we get. And on the face of it, it makes no business sense to reduce your profits by only selling 90% of your crop. But just as over-fishing will mean reduced numbers of fish, so all of the earth's resources are finite, and increased yields through the appliance of science can only take us so far. So there is in fact pragmatic as well as ethical and theological truth in a way of living shaped by thanksgiving for what has been given. Treating what we have as a gift, will ensure it remains plentiful.

There is a further dimension of 'gift' arising from our readings, which may be illuminated with the help of an example drawn from eighteenth century encounters between Puritan colonists, and the indigenous people of the 'new world' across the Atlantic. Imagine you are such a colonist, and that you are made welcome at an indigenous American gathering. You are invited to share in a pipe of tobacco; and you note that the pipe itself is a rather beautifully made object carved from a soft red stone. Your hosts evidently observe your admiration, because when you come to leave, they present the pipe to you as a gift.

You are delighted, and take it home. It occurs to you the British Museum would value such an artefact, but for the time being you'll keep it on your mantelpiece. Time passes, and then you are visited by members of a neighbouring indigenous tribe, and irritated to discover they have designs on the pipe. Your translator

explains that if you want to show goodwill, you should offer them a smoke and give them the pipe.

This strikes you as impertinent and unreasonable. After all, the pipe was given to you, and you now own it. The translator explains to you that the red stone pipe is in fact a peace offering that for some years has circulated amongst local peoples, staying with each for a period, but always given away sooner or later.

Here is a clash between two fundamentally different understandings of 'gift'. One worldview assumes that if you are given something, it should be given away again; or at least that if it is kept, something else should be given. Giving, therefore, always has movement and momentum. Gifts are being passed on. But there is also the contrasting idea that once something is given to you, it is your property; if you want to take it out of circulation and put it in a cupboard or museum, that is your right.

With this in mind, let's return to our readings. In the second book of Kings, a man brings the first fruits to Elisha, the man of God. It consists of twenty loaves of barley, and fresh ears of grain. Elisha instructs that this gift should immediately be given away, and set before a hundred hungry people. And then in the Gospel, a much larger crowd need feeding. Amongst their number is a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. The boy might have thanked God for the gift of that food, but kept it for himself and his friends. Instead he gives it to Jesus, who distributes it, but only, note, after he has given thanks. As I noted earlier in relation both to the Hebrew idea of 'first fruits', and our use of the Earth's resources, treating what we have as gift, will ensure it remains plentiful.

So when Paul's letter to the Ephesians speaks of the power at work in us [that is] able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, he is speaking about the power of Christ to help us understanding gifts and giving, and the movement and flow of gifts that ensures abundance. I said we might find it harder to grasp this than many of our forebears, and this is because we are shaped by an updated version of the outlook of the colonist who stopped the circulation of gifts.

Take, for example, the recent news story about Burberry's policy of burning unsold clothes, bags and perfumes – so their brand is not devalued by discounting and being worn by the 'wrong' people. The human labour and natural resources involved literally 'go up in smoke'. From a certain perspective no doubt this makes sense, but it is not a Biblical perspective.

To be fair to our culture, Burberry's actions have been widely criticised. We may live in an increasingly monetised and marketised world, but it is still accepted that many areas of life are not best supported by market forces. Family life, church life, pure science, public service and indeed the whole world of the arts are all about far more than buying and selling. The scholar and cultural critic Lewis Hyde proposes the term 'gift economy' to describe the way the art world functions: a world where a price cannot be put on what lifts the spirit and revives the soul. Of course artists need

to make a living, but music and literature and drama and sculpture are gifts whose value can never be solely based on what someone is prepared to pay for them.

As a priest and a preacher I know the power of Scripture to challenge contemporary assumptions and practices; to show us our world from the perspective of the divine. But I find encouragement that there are other voices speaking to our condition; the workings of the Holy Spirit may be glimpsed and heard elsewhere; already in this sermon I have quoted a comedian, and an encounter between different cultures, and mentioned science and the arts. I could also have referred to folk tales and fairy stories, and the deep cultural memory and wisdom they contain, in which gifts and generosity are often key features: and those who will not share come to a bad end.

And perhaps I have time for one more comedian, who directly addresses the matter of money, and the extent to which money is itself a gift. I refer to the satirist Stewart Lee, who creates a distorted version of himself to biting comic effect:

He says: ‘When I met my wife, I wasn’t earning enough to pay tax, but I am now. So now I’d like to pay less or ideally no tax at all. The money I’ve got, that’s mine, and I want to keep all of that. And I don’t want any of it to go to schools or hospitals or to help people less fortunate than me, either here or [abroad]. That money’s mine. And people say to me, ‘Don’t you think you are lucky getting certain professional breaks that have helped you to earn?’ No, I don’t think that comes into it... if you’re earning, you have to think there’s some divine cosmic justice at play, in which you’re being rewarded and the poor are being punished for some crime or moral deficiency. And the money’s mine. And people say, you know, ‘Don’t you think you’re lucky to be born a certain time in a certain class?’ No. The money is mine.’

Lee’s routine is meant to be ridiculous, but may come uncomfortably close to what some actually think, and a worldview with no concept of gift or thankfulness. It reminds me of Jesus’ parable of the rich fool, who pulls down his barns to build bigger ones, so he can store all his grain and his goods. God then tells him that he will die that night, and ‘the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves and are not rich toward God.’

The rich fool is the opposite of the boy with the five loaves and two fishes. He has forgotten that all things come from God and return to God. He has forgotten about thanksgiving and gifts, and that gifts need to move if they are to remain plentiful.

Today, in this Eucharist, we receive the gifts of Christ himself at the altar. Here is the ultimate example of the gift economy, in which the divine life is made available to all at no charge. So let us, in every aspect of our lives, recall not only that everything is gift, but that gifts are there to pass on and share long before we reach our deathbed. And ‘Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever, Amen.’