

# Today is God's gift to you, how you use it is your gift to him.

## A sermon for Stewardship Sunday 2014

**Today is God's gift to you,  
how you use it is your gift to him.**

Usually when it comes to knocking out a sermon  
I work at it early-on in the week – and then try to leave it for a day  
or two to marinate

Saturdays are known at home as “tweak-day”

It's the beginnings and the endings  
I find the most difficult/challenging  
and the last thing I do on Saturdays  
is to come up with a title ....

.... and by the time the alarm goes off on Sunday morning

The tile *if [nothing else]* gets rubbished  
and I come up with something entirely different ...

.... not that it should concern you *[of course]*  
because the Tile's mine *[it's for me]*

And I say that for no other reason than

you will hear what you want to hear  
and I leave you to put your own title to it *[if it's worth remembering]*....

*[... even though I risk it being a one-worder] [RUBBISH]*

Enough of that though  
.... because today's going to be different

### **Shift;**

The moment my name was put down for Stewardship Sunday  
I knew straight away  
how I intended to grab your attention *[at the beginning]*  
and I knew that because  
it was given to me *by the very best authority* ....

but there's no end of surprises today  
because I'm going to break with convention  
and let you in on my Sermon Title

.... and if that **Title** is something that strikes a chord with you  
then perhaps you might respond  
*[in an appropriate way]*  
when it comes to placing your Stewardship Invitation  
in the collection plate when it comes round

And my authority for telling it *"like this"*  
comes from no other than  
one of the great books of the Old Testament;

***[.... this is from Numbers 10: verses 1-7]***

*The LORD spoke further to Moses, saying,  
"Make yourself two trumpets of silver,  
of hammered work you shall make them;  
and you shall use them for summoning the congregation  
and for having the camps set out. "*

*When both are blown,  
all the congregation shall  
gather themselves to you at the doorway of the tent of meeting.*

*Yet if only one is blown,  
then the leaders, [the heads of the divisions of Israel]  
shall assemble before you*

*But when you blow an alarm,  
the camps that are pitched on the east side shall set out.*

*when you blow an alarm the second time,  
the camps that are pitched on the south side shall set out;  
an alarm is to be blown for them to set out.*

*"When convening the assembly,  
however, you shall blow without sounding an alarm.*

***and whatever was good for Mosses is good for Mitford  
Play Track[s] ..... Bugle Reveille***

*Did you know that even to this day  
in the British army*

there's a whole long list of different bugle calls  
that give specific instruction  
to commanders and the troops

*[and if my Dad's stories are to be believed]*  
he woke up every morning for seven whole years  
to the sound of the Reveille *[... can you believe that]*

In fact I have it on good authority  
that the only way Jean [Bagnell] ever gets Roger out of bed in  
the mornings  
is with a good blast on the bugle *[amazing isn't it ....]*

In our household *[though]*  
the early morning call has evolved into  
something quite different ...

I used to believe our family deserved  
a more gentle subtle start to the day

you know what it's like with teenagers *[at 11 in the morning]*  
they need to be reasoned with ....

*"... It's time to get up*  
*... come-on sweetheart*  
*... This is the first day of the rest of your life*

... oh no – no – no – no – porkies – porkies – porkies  
it wasn't like that at all ....

***It's time to get up  
come-on Goldilocks  
This is the first day of the rest of your life!!!!***

Even to this day Kate recons she's been scarred for life ...

.... but what a cracking good sermon tile – eh?

***It's time to get up  
.... this is the first day of the rest of your life!!!!***

and even when I hit the sack [*last night*]  
I still was still thinking “*Ace Title*”[*John*] ....

.... but then by 6.30 I'm thinking  
.... there's something's missing  
.... well God's giftedness for a start  
.... and possible a little more emphasis  
on reason and change in our lives

.... and where's the link with Stewardship?

***Pause;***

Maybe the title [*the wakeup call*] [*the reveille*] [*the message*]  
Joanna [and I]  
would really love  
to have register with you today

should be more along the lines;

***“What you are - is God's gift to you,  
.... and what you become - is your gift to God.”***

now I think we're getting somewhere

***Repeat;***

***“What you are - is God's gift to you,  
what you become - is your gift to God.”***

I think in a way  
that sort of - sums up what our faith's about really

OK [*then*] let's make that our text for today ....

***Move;***

So one day a spiritual writer received a present through the post.  
It was a large whole cheese neatly wrapped in brown paper.

As he received the parcel from the postman  
his first thought was –

*“I shall certainly enjoy this, what a treat!”*

As he carefully opened it,  
his second thought was:

*"Who's sent it to me?"*

His address was typed,  
.... the postmark wasn't clear and  
.... he couldn't find any that said *"this is from me ...."*

He relates how he felt incomplete  
because he couldn't carry through the receiving of the gift  
by saying *"thank you"*  
to the person who'd given it.

It left him with a bit of an empty *[dissatisfied]* feeling

Now it happens our friend was a careful man  
and he neatly folded the brown paper  
and put it in the top drawer *just like my Mum used too]*  
I can still hear her say ....

*[".... you never know when it will come in useful ...."]*

Some 18 months later  
he needed to cover a book  
*[and maybe you've guessed by now]*  
as he unfolded the paper  
he noticed a tiny piece of writing in one corner that he'd  
missed:  
*'Love from your niece'.*

Eighteen months after the gift arrived,

he rushed to the phone to say **thank you!**

**The Bible is** *[in many ways]* like the gift tag on a parcel –  
it tells us that the world is God's gift.

It removes from us that sense of being  
incomplete  
empty and dissatisfied  
because we don't know  
to whom *[or how]* to say thank you

*[thank you]* for the world we find ourselves part of.

Let me read you the set OT lesson for this morning  
it's that remarkable passage  
we find right at the beginning of Genesis ;

<sup>1</sup>*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,*

<sup>2</sup>*the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

<sup>3</sup>*Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.*

<sup>4</sup>*And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.*

<sup>5</sup>*God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*



Wow!!!!

it doesn't get any better than that *[does it]*

*and I deliberately chose those words because ....*

... *[because]* it epitomises **God's love**

.... God's love is at the heart of all creation

.... everything *[but everything]* is infused by His love and presence

.... there's no part of creation which is

*[which is]* not only God's gift

but in it

God gives himself

Remember that picture of the burning bush *[in the book of Exodus]*

.... the bush is the symbol of creation.

.... the burning is a symbol of God's indwelling love in all things.

.... If our eyes were opened

we would be walking barefoot everywhere! ‘

*“.... the place on which you are standing is holy ground” [Exodus 3:5]*

**.... Today is God's gift to you.**

**Move;**

Now what about the second half of that sentence?

Let's remind ourselves what those words are:

***How you live it - is your gift to God.***

The Christian life is not merely a set of rules to live by [*not even by the standards of the Ten Commandments*]

A couple of weeks ago I talked about  
the discipline and the obedience required of disciples

Rules [*as in the Ten Commandments*]  
can often be our guide and help us to live life  
and give us a set of broad parameters

However there's a second [*much – much deeper*] level of obedience

.... and that's the obedience that comes as a loving response  
.... the Christian life is primarily a response to God's love.

It seeks to be  
.... creative,  
.... spirit-filled,  
.... responsive to the moment.

We seek to weave an imaginative tapestry [*with our lives*]  
which is in response to the overwhelming love of God.

Above all,  
what Jesus of Nazareth does -  
is to show us a life offered to God.

## *Shift;*

Over the course of the coming weeks  
we are steeling [*and preparing*] ourselves for a journey  
.... we journey with Christ  
.... a journey that ultimately  
takes us full square to the foot of the cross

The reason why the cross is so significant for Christians  
is that it seals a life totally offered to God  
in which we are invited to participate.

.... in prayer and service,  
.... in laughter and joy,  
.... in healing and teaching

Our Lord offers his life to God.

.... that total offering,  
.... with no reservation or hidden reserves,  
.... is given on the Cross.

It's reflections on the Cross  
which drives St John's thinking in our Gospel Reading:

*'When I am lifted up from the earth,  
I will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32).*

This total self-offering [*as Jesus perceives it*]  
is frightening in its demands:

*"my soul is troubled"*

Yet,

it isn't to be avoided precisely because

*[because]* it is the seal set upon his life of self-offering:

*'it is for this reason that I have come to this hour' [John 12:27]*

Our journey with Christ

culminates on Good Friday

and it's on that very day

when Jesus in his wounded glory

shows us what it means

*[to say]:*

***How you use today - is your gift to God.***

Christian Stewardship is no more *[and no less]*

than holding before us a reminder that:

***How you live today is your gift to God.***

Our giving through the Church is *[has]* to be seen in that light.

It is a tithe *[in the sense]*

.... it's a gift that represents and consecrates the whole.

I have been asked in the past:

*"How much should I put in my envelope?"*

The answer is, of course,  
that it is different for everybody according to their circumstances.

But let me tell you one final story ....

### ***Move;***

Last week Linda organised  
a food collection at Asda

The generosity of shoppers was nothing less than overwhelming

In five hours  
well over half a ton of food was  
collected on behalf of the Wansbeck Valley Food Bank

*[I think one day Linda will be able  
to write a book about the whole Food-Bank experience ....]*

but the story that struck me last week  
was that of an elderly lady who offered  
a packet of pasta

and with that she proceeded to apologise that it wasn't much  
but all she could afford this week

Her giftedness *[her generosity]* was beyond question

*.... to someone who has nothing a packet of pasta means everything*

***“So how much should we give?”***

***Where might we begin?***

***‘What can I give him?’***

The immediate response should simply be

***‘I will give everything’ – [that’s what Jesus asked of the disciples]***

*“Deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me”*  
and that takes me to the heart of **this word disciple**

By the very root of the word it  
it implies discipline  
and discipline involves choice

If we are to follow Him *[Christ]*  
.... to proclaim the good news  
.... to share with others the abundant love of God,  
  
.... then we must make choices  
.... and we must decide on our most important commitments.

If we are to be faithful disciples  
.... we must resource this Church properly  
.... and that inevitably means  
.... *[for all the reasons already explained]*

## ***giving more***

At this point I **could** suggest you do that by ....

.... [by] joining the planned giving scheme  
.... or simple increasing your pledge,  
.... or re-evaluating the importance of God in your lives  
.... and making choices to spend less on other things

I could suggest

.... you give what you earn in the first hour of the working week  
and then by doing so you are  
*“using your baptismal membership of the Church  
to offer the whole working week to God”*

I’m actually not going to suggest any of these things  
.... it’s not my place [or my business] – it’s yours

But what I am going to do  
is to share with you some words I found recently  
and I find them particularly challenging;

*What giving again I ask in dismay  
and must I be giving and giving alway?*

*Oh no, said the angel, whose eye pierced me through.  
Just stop when the Saviour stops giving to you!*

As I said towards the beginning ....

***Today is God's gift to you, how you use it is your gift to him.***

in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit     ***Amen***