

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: April 11: 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15: Some Notes

So, relationships sorted out; now money. That awkward moment when you see the man or woman with the collection bowl, and have to decide whether to engage or evade; or the person you know fairly well but not very well says “I hate having to ask you, but could you possibly.....” Or you have had an enjoyable but expensive evening out, spent more than you had budgeted, and there is a disaster emergency collection at the door of the theatre and those around you are hurriedly putting back out of sight £5 notes as others flourish £20 notes. This time Paul doesn’t specifically mention money, but you know where his sermon on grace, poverty, riches, generosity, equality, etc is leading. He is following up on his request a year earlier to start a planned giving campaign: put aside what you can afford.

St George’s had a planned giving campaign some years ago; and took the (expensive) advice of fund raising consultants to launch it with a fund-raising dinner at which one of the richer members of the congregation (not one of the most regular worshippers) pledged a large sum. The aim was to spark a competition in generosity – uncomfortable for more thoughtful souls thinking: “ I don’t know what others earn or what their commitments are, how can I judge what is generous, what is sacrificial, what is reasonable, what is mean?”

A useful reference point: The Jewish festival of Purim encourages poor people to find someone even poorer, and give them a gift.

A bit of background, and we have touched on this before. The Church in Jerusalem was experiencing a crops failure that hit Judaea badly; Christian Jews were not the most popular of Jews when it came to solidarity during a famine; the Jerusalem Church strategy of people selling assets and distributing the proceeds to the poor was not necessarily a viable long-term strategy! If you own and keep a field, you can have an annual income. If you sell that field and give away the sale money..... Oh, and remember that Jerusalem Christians had indeed shared the Gospel with the gentiles who were now being asked to say thank you in cash terms. But they had often done so rather reluctantly and conditionally. We know that Paul was a little afraid that they might actually reject gentile money as dirty money.

So Paul parades Macedonia as an example of sacrificial giving. (Two Macedonians, Aristarchus and Epathroditus, were among his closest supporters as he neared the end of his life.) Why were Macedonians poor? The Roman take-over of Macedonia had diverted from Macedonians their main assets of gold, silver and timber. (Think possible Russian plans for Ukraine.) Then the Romans had carved Macedonia up into self-contained provinces, and largely put a stop to internal trade. As a footnote: Corinth doing pretty well at this time (though being a Christian tended to rule you out of being a Corinthian plutocrat); but in AD 77 there was an earthquake, and Corinth’s turn to experience hardship.

Verse 9 – Christ becoming poor for us to become rich – is probably the key sentence, and the one that overshadows all the sensitive financial stuff. Exodus 16:18 is the Old

Testament passage that speaks of God ensuring everybody has enough for the day. Some Christian teaching seems to focus on this and on e.g. (most) birds living a day to day existence without bothering about tomorrow. Paul, perhaps with the failure of the Jerusalem Church give-away strategy in mind, is more circumspect. Actually birds do top up e.g. before migration or in the breeding season; and humans who live to 80 or 90 can't really base their life-style on flowers that live for a day or birds that live a very few years. Paul is encouraging PLANNED giving.

One of the commentaries raises questions about Church fund-raising and expenditure – arguing basically that planned congregational giving for prioritised mission-focused expenditure is more to be commended than gambling, dodgy investments, selling things below cost price, and spending on show more than mission. Church of England parishes are to some extent protected from the harsh realities of staff and premises funding faced by other churches. I recall in another church someone asking, “How can we justify paying for a heated altar rail, when Christian brothers and sisters worship in a tin shed?” Maybe a false comparison, but maybe a fair point?

The picture that catches the imagination is of the Macedonians “Giving JOYFULLY”. If you have ever been involved in fund raising, you will have appreciated the grudging “Oh, alright then,”; but even more the “Gladly, I'm only sorry I can't do more” – even if the grudging donation was £20 and the joyful one £5.