



A sermon by the Rt Revd Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani for the Church of England Online Service for Generosity Week, 26 September 2021

The Gospel reading we've just heard from St. Matthew is a favourite of mine, so much so that my husband and I chose it for our wedding service over 30 years ago now. I warm to the sentiment of not worrying about what we are to eat, drink or wear but instead trusting in the God who knows us and provides all we need. And yet it also makes for difficult and uncomfortable reading. What must it be like to hear this portion of Scripture if you're someone who, in material terms, lives in poverty; someone who doesn't know where the next meal is coming from, how they're going to afford their child's uniform or this month's rent?

So, I want to be very cautious about what I say and emphasise that this passage isn't to be read literally. And yet, it does have something important to say to us about the nature of faith and of our general disposition in life, particularly for those of us who are comfortably off. Worrying is a human condition, we all do it, even though we know that it seldom, if ever, solves anything. Here, Jesus is pointing towards a different way of being which is about an intentional leaning away from worry and towards greater trust in God. This is something we often say as Christians but very few are really able to live it.

But what has all this got to do with *Generosity* which is the theme for this week's service. Well there was a clue in our first reading from 1 Timothy where St. Paul contrasted the folly of setting our hopes on the uncertainty of material

riches (v17), against the call to be rich in good works, generosity and the readiness to share (v18), for it is these things, Paul says, that lead to “the life that really is life” (v19). Material riches verses richness of spirit and generosity. And I want to suggest that if we’re able to loosen the grip of undue worry and anxiety we’re much more likely to unlock the key both to a sense of gratitude and in turn to greater generosity – generosity of spirit that leads to generosity of action. For worrying less about what we don’t have, or what we’re fearful of losing, means we’re much more able to focus on the good things – on what we do have and our willingness to share it.

So anxiety and generosity are directly linked – the more anxious you are about how much money you have, what car you drive, how perfect your life is, how to maintain your status and position, the less generous you’re likely to be. I’m not talking here about needing to get rid of our possessions or feeling guilty about enjoying them. Far from it. I’m simply talking about freedom from being overly attached to them. There’s something here about sitting light rather than clinging fast.

My family arrived in England unexpectedly in 1980 following the events of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. My parents lost their home, most of their possessions and everything they’d worked for and built up. But over time and with help from the generosity of others they made a home here in England and soon began to gather around them new belongings. They enjoyed these things that helped turn their house into a home but they were never overly attached to them; they weren’t defined by them and they didn’t live in fear of losing them again. They took pleasure in them but knew that if they lost everything again, that would be OK. So they were released from fear *and* they were generous to a fault, in every aspect of their lives. And that generosity meant they were people who others loved to be with, a couple full of joy and deep faith.

My sense is that in the Church of England we have a little way still to go in understanding the full extent of what it means to live as generous disciples. There are many, of course, who give of their time, money and commitment and that means we can continue serving the communities we are part of. But there’s space, I believe, for an even greater outpouring of generosity in our shared life together, both a generosity of spirit towards one another, and especially those who are different to us, but also generosity in financial giving.

In Jesus Christ we have a saviour who gave everything - he emptied himself in obedience to his father and in service of others and was faithful even to death on a cross – the ultimate sacrifice. He gave without counting the cost and if we are to become more Christ-like, then we too are called to give without counting the cost, to give of our best (not just the scraps or left overs) not just the bare minimum, but to give abundantly. We are called to practice generosity in every area of our life, trusting that God will transform what we give (of our time, our money, and in how we make space for others); and that God will use these in ways we may never know about or be able to imagine.

In church circles these days there's often talk of scarcity. Of how the Church of England no longer has the status and position we once did, of our financial struggles and our worries about future survival. This narrative fuels fear, dampens generosity and undermines our mission to share the good news of Jesus Christ. It demonstrates a lack of trust in the God by whose grace the church has survived this long and who will lead us into the future.

In fact, in many of our parishes, schools and chaplaincies I see extraordinary signs of life and vitality. I see good people, worshipping faithfully and serving their communities. Yes things are changing – our gatherings may often be smaller and our influence less tangible and that can be unsettling but our faith compels us to *take hold of the life that really is life*, both as individuals and as a church, to live as those who are free of fear and full of generosity and as harbingers of hope in our communities. Amen.

+Guli Chelmsford

C of E Online service to celebrate generosity

25th September 2021

1 Timothy 6.11-19

Matthew 6.19-33