

Giving for life, living generously. Ingatestone 28th Feb 2010.
Deuteronomy 26. 1-11. Romans 10. 8-13. Luke 4. 1-13.

£56 million and 20p. The amount won on Friday 12th on the Euromillions draw. Why couldn't they live in Ingatestone? Perhaps if they did, they would have given the church the 20p? They appear a very nice couple on the media and they are looking to give some of the money away to their local schools as well as their family. Let's face it, they could afford to build and equip a local school and pay the salary of the staff. What an astonishing amount of money it is, £56 million and 20p. What a responsibility.

Our financial resources and how to use them are a real responsibility. Jesus said, where your treasure is, there will be your heart be also. In fact Jesus spoke more about money than practically any other topic. So I make no apologies for speaking on giving today, or for Richard and Martin speaking briefly in the last two weeks and Allen speaking next week. The PCC decided that I would preach on the topic of 'Giving for life' and 'Living generously' today, as well as making sure that through February everyone who came to church was given one of the leaflets produced by the Archbishops' Council. I do hope that if you have not already you take the leaflet home and give it serious prayer. On Maundy Thursday will be praying first in here and then in the choir vestry from 8 pm until midnight. We need to pray for God's guidance.

Why do we have churches? I want to something really unusual. Can you turn to the person next to you or near you and answer that question. Why do we have churches? There are fortunately lots of reasons we recognise. But of course if you asked the thousands of people in our villages who never darken a church door, I wonder what answer you would get? A venue for an old fashioned wedding. Somewhere that some rather eccentric people go on a Sunday rather than shopping, or playing sport or cleaning the car or just relaxing. Last Sunday we had a

congregation in the mid 40s. At Fryerning Church I had 14. Just after I had finished, a group of hikers turned up. They were local and there were more of them than the two congregations added together. They wanted to look around Fryerning Church. It was very muddy and they were all very muddy. I said I was happy for them to come in if they took off their muddy boots, as we had new carpet and they would not walk around their own homes in muddy boots. About half of them walked off in disgust. The half that came in commented how warm it was, they obviously expected the church to be cold. There was some interest in the historic items. When I talked about the regular worship held at the church they almost all glazed over. No interest. This is the world in which we live.

Why do we have churches? As you identified, a whole range of reasons, but primarily it is to be the local base for the mission of God. This church is not my church, or your church as we so often say, it is God's church. In fact we, the people, are God's church and this is the building. The mission to the local people is not my mission, or your mission, it is God's mission. And what is that? We see it very clearly in the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 10. 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... the Lord is generous to all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the Lord will be saved'. I did not especially choose the readings for today to fit the theme. Here in this short passage from Romans we see that God is so generous towards humanity that he desires that everyone will be saved.

I hope you might have been watching the History of the Bible on Channel 4 on Sunday afternoons. Two weeks ago it was Anne Widdicombe examining the place of the Ten Commandments in society. She had been with Stephen Fry and Christopher Hitchens in a debate in Oxford about whether the Catholic Church had been a force for good in the world. I am sure you can guess the result of the debate. In interviews

afterwards Stephen Fry said the Ten Commandments were wicked and positively evil as they restricted human life and potential. Christopher Hitchens, another of the modern militant atheists, described God as savage. Yet we see in the Romans' passage, and throughout the Bible, God only wants the best for people. God wants everyone to be saved. That is God's mission. We are God's partners in this task. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 2nd World War memorably said, "The Church is the only organisation that exists for those who are not its members". That is right. The church is not a cosy social club for believers. The whole experience of church should empower us for living in the world, somewhere we come to be strengthened in our faith, as we have been doing with our 2nd Sunday sessions and other times. Somewhere to experience God's love. Somewhere very different from anywhere else.

In the Deuteronomy chapter 26 we see how our response should be towards God's mission of generosity to us. We should be generous in return. The people are told to bring the first fruits of the harvest for God. As a farmer, this is the most important fruit, the fruit that states the promise for the future harvest. The passage reminds the people of all God has done for them, of their relationship with him, and then how they should respond. We should do the same. We know how God has helped us through our lives. In fact life itself, from a Christian perspective, is a gift from God to be valued and treasured. In verse ten the people are told to bring the first fruit to God. Do they do it miserably? Are they to do it begrudgingly? No, after they have given they are to go and party, "you shall celebrate with all the bounty the Lord has given you". What a marvellous picture. Bringing their gifts to God and then going off to celebrate all that God has done for them. What a lesson that is for the 21st century not just in Ingatestone.

So if we have church buildings, including this church, for the mission of God, if that mission is directed towards those who never enter but none the less God wants saved, and we are

partners in God's mission here in Ingatestone, then we too need to respond generously. There is so much we could do here if we had the money. That is why we talk about. We want to develop the mission here. In the last few years we have had over 20 little children brought here for baptism each year. How can we accommodate them on Sunday mornings? These parents value what the church offers, but feel it is impossible to worship here. We need facilities for a crèche and people to run it. We need improved facilities for our children's groups. We need better toilets. The list is long. Is it my list, or is it what is needed for the mission of God here?

Our parish share contribution this year is just over £37,000. This is the contribution we pay towards the cost of the ministry of the Church of England both here in our parish and throughout the Diocese. Fryerning's is £17,000. Paying this has to be our first priority. At Shenfield and St. Thomas' Brentwood, for example, the parish share is over £129,000 and £114,000. Lots of factors come into play in the setting of the figure. The figures are produced by the deanery with 21 churches. Our average weekly giving is £4.80. That makes us 19th out of 21 churches. The average weekly giving in the Deanery of Brentwood is £7.66. The highest is St. Stephen's Ingrave, with £13.48. Yes, that is the average weekly giving. Are we really saying we are so poor in comparison to others?

We have been generous through our gift days and we have another this Easter Saturday. These should be about extras and developments for the mission of the church, not about covering basic expenses.

The leaflet reminds us that we should give thanks for all God has done for us. We should give regularly to charity and to Church. The General Synod of the Church of England challenges us to give 5%, that is £1 in £20 to charity and the same to church. Could you do that and then celebrate, like those giving the first fruits in the Deuteronomy passage?

The temptations of Jesus remind us that even he could be tempted to put his own concerns before those of God. Jesus responded to the first temptation, to make bread from a stone, by saying “man does not live by bread alone”. To the temptation to have all authority by worshipping the devil, Jesus replies, “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only”. To the temptation to throw himself from the Temple, Jesus replies, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”. These temptations are for Jesus to put himself on a pedestal. He reminds the devil the focus should be on his mission, to serve God. If we believe we have all that we have through the generosity of God, whose total approach towards all humanity is generosity, and that we are partners with him in his mission, how can we be anything but generous in our response?

Amen.

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