

Sermon preached by Bishop Rupert Hoare at the Church of St Thomas Becket, Hamburg, on Sunday 27th March 2011, 'Christian Giving Sunday'

What a wealth of things to speak about this morning, from those quarrelsome Israelites in the wilderness and the Lord promising to stand in front of Moses while he strikes the rock to make water gush out of it, to the still water of Jacob's well and the living water offered freely to that poor woman whose life was dominated by the men she had to serve and obey, here was liberation for her from her enslavement, offered her a Samaritan woman, by a Jewish man who claims to be the Messiah.

And then the Epistle: one of St Paul's finest pieces of writing, a peroration and climax to all that he had expounded before: "Seeing that we are justified by faith, and have obtained access to this grace, *in which we now stand...*" Paul at his most affirmative of the privileged position in which Christians find themselves....And then, suddenly, he checks himself, as if a little voice were saying to him: "Hold on a minute, life isn't actually just a bed of roses, even for Christians". And so he recalls the suffering that is also involved. Somehow these two contrasting things go together: the hardship and the joy, the genuine liberating love of God, *and* the suffering, it is as if you cannot have one without the other. And Paul is positive about the suffering too, for suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces *hope* –and that's where he want us to get to. For this hope does not disappoint... Why? Because God's love has been poured into our hearts... And at this point, Paul is back spelling out again the great truths at the heart of the Christian faith.

So, in all that, there is more than enough for three sermons, let alone one. But it is 'Christian Giving Sunday', and the preacher cannot ignore or bypass that either. And maybe that brings us down with a bump, to the realities of church life: Gesine and I know a parish very well in our diocese back in England that fell a pretty long way short of meeting all its financial challenges last year, and is faced with the challenge of increasing the level of giving dramatically in this current year. And that's true in many, many churches. It sounds as though things are not all that different here.

As I was thinking how to combine preaching on one of those great texts we have heard read this morning with Christian Giving Sunday, I made what for me was a discovery (scholars will have known about it of course), but for me it was a discovery. I'll come to it in a minute.

Back to Paul: when he wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome, he had not yet been there. He could not write to them with the same kind of no-holds-barred bluntness that he could - and did - write to those churches that, under God, he had helped to create, like the church in Corinth. They were a fractious and awkward bunch of people, who caused him a great deal of heartache and headache. And he had no hesitation whatever in getting to the nitty-gritty of church life, for instance, in the matter of raising money, and generous giving. He brings all that in, amidst the most marvellous theological expositions of Christian truth, in the various letters that he wrote to the Christians at Corinth. So if you want to read what he had to say about Christian giving, you need to turn to the second letter to the Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9.

Now, here's the discovery, for me the discovery, of which I spoke a moment ago: when Paul is talking about God's gracious ways with us human beings through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and when he's talking about the kind of giving that should be the mark of Christian discipleship, *he uses the same word*, the word 'Charis' (the straightforward translation of which is 'grace') to *describe BOTH*.

Modern translations, however, since the Reformation, with the blessed exception of the King James Authorised Version, 400 years old this year, use two quite different words for these two aspects of our life. 'Grace' is retained for God's relationship with us. 'Generous enterprise' is how our NRSV translates the Greek when Paul is referring to the practical business of raising money for a collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. Go back to the Greek, and you'll find Paul uses *the same word for both*.

By translating this one word in such contrasting ways (for good reasons which we can't go into now), we may be making it difficult for us to comprehend the Christian significance of *either*. The grace of God becomes an ethereal, other-worldly, idea that we find difficult to fill with meaning: it is too heavenly to be of much earthly use! And collecting money, while it may indeed be a 'generous enterprise', becomes a difficult chore which we have to face once a year, when the finances look difficult, or when the Bishop decrees we have to think about Christian giving.

For Paul, if I may be allowed to use a financial expression, these two aspects of Christian life seem to have been two sides of the same coin. Go back for a moment to that passage from the Romans we heard this morning: through Christ, we have obtained access to this grace (this outpouring of God's love for us), unmerited, undeserved, and yet given us freely, at great great cost to himself),...- this grace *IN WHICH WE STAND*.

Those are marvellous words. It is not as if God's gracious act was simply once and for all, over and done with. It is the *reality in which we stand*, the reality in which we are to live and move and have our being, here, now! The reality of our life now: in this grace we stand.

Of course it is easy to forget that, to become so immersed in our tasks, whether in the church or out in the world, or at home, to become so immersed in the responsibilities we have, that we can forget we *stand in the grace of God*, in the gracious, loving, presence of God who is there for us, and for all the world. And it is in that gracious, generous, undeserved reality or environment of God's present love for each and all of us, that we have to live out our lives, including the use of those gifts we have been given, of time, of talents and of money.

So when Paul is asking the Christians in Corinth (in Greece) to take part in a collection he and Titus and the others are making for the Christians of Palestine in Jerusalem, he uses this same language of gift, of grace, 'Charis', again and again. In their giving to this collection, they are to express the grace in which they stand.

Of course, Paul can, and does, use other more straightforwardly human techniques of persuasion as well. He compares the Corinthian Christians with those of Macedonia, who have already given. He is quite ready to play on the Corinthians' pride: you're not going to do worse, are you, than those people up in Macedonia! What would the Macedonians think?! (It's all too easy to translate that to situations in the church today: last year a deanery in our diocese which we know very well performed worst in terms of giving to the diocese of all the deaneries...we're jolly well not going to be at the bottom of the table this year, are we!)

But Paul, while quite capable of using such ploys, actually draws far more substantially on the truths of the faith he is proclaiming. For all stand in the grace of God, whether in Macedonia, Corinth, Rome, Jerusalem, Hamburg or Manchester. All are one, in that reality. Paul sums up the supreme generosity of Christ in one of his most famous sentences: "For you know the grace ('Charis') of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich". Therefore all must share what they have been given with each other, to make a reality –or better express the reality-, that God has created through Christ, the reality of communion, fellowship, in the one Body of Christ.

No one is to be asked to give more than they can afford, or to impoverish themselves or their family. They are asked to give with a generosity that reflects, as far as we imperfect people can, the generosity of our generous, gracious God.

What we will find, says Paul, is that as we give of our material means whatever we can, we will receive in return far more, in terms of the gifts of the Spirit. There will be a kind of exchange going on, so that there should be, as Paul says, a *balance* (and, goodness knows, there is a spiritual poverty in our western world that needs to be balanced by those from elsewhere who may have far less in material wealth than we do.)

Two final things in what St Paul says:

First, - a famous phrase- God loves a cheerful giver. Giving is to be done cheerfully, not grudgingly. And second: the word 'Charis', grace, is almost the same as the word 'Chara' which means 'joy'. When writing to the Corinthians, Paul seems to be playing on the similarity between these two words: the *grace* of God (Charis) granted to the Macedonians, and their abundant *joy* (Chara), even in the midst of great affliction and great poverty: grace, and joy, even in suffering, affliction and poverty can, and do, go together.

Let us pray, as we gather round the Lord's table, and receive his gift to us of himself, that we may indeed stand in the grace to which we have been given access, and live our lives generously, giving of our time, our talents, and our financial resources, for the good of his church, and of the world we seek to serve.

Rupert Hoare, Lent 2011