

## **Year B**

### **2 Corinthians 8:7-15**

The telephone rang in the minister's study.

"Hello, is this Rev. Johns?" the caller asked.

"Yes it is."

"This is Inland Revenue. We wonder if you can help us?"

The minister felt butterflies in his tummy.

Why was the tax department ringing him?

Nervously he replied; "I'll do the best I can."

"Do you know a Bruce Parker?" asked the tax inspector.

“Why, yes” replied the minister. “He’s a member of my congregation.”

“Did he donate £10,000 to the church building fund?”

A smile comes across the minister’s face. “He will.”

Tony Campolo, the American evangelist, was once a guest speaker at a mission rally. He was asked to lead in prayer for a missionary doctor the group supported and the purpose of the prayer was to ask God to provide the \$5000 urgently needed for the medical centre the doctor ran.

Tony refused. He knew his audience was made up of people who were materially prosperous. So he declared he would pray only after everyone in the room gave to the project the money they had on them that day. The audience were stunned, but when Tony started emptying his pockets they knew he was serious. After some hesitation everyone started following suit. The prayer of request soon became a prayer of thanksgiving, for by the end of the giving they had collected \$8000, much more than was needed in the first place!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You A Story*

This Sunday is not part of our Stewardship season which will follow at the end of August and the beginning of September but the lectionary has offered us this passage and rather than postpone it or worse, duck it, I'm taking it on!

It does, of course, have to do with money and the giving of money in support of others. In Romans 15 Paul gave thanks for the Gentile churches that had financially supported the poor mother church in Jerusalem. We know from the evidence of Paul's letters that the Jerusalem church did not look upon Paul's credentials as an apostle and a Christian

leader with unqualified favour. He had to work to make a case for himself and so it is to his immense credit that he made it a feature of his ministry to encourage the new Gentile churches to give generously to the church in Jerusalem.

I studied for an economic's degree in the 1980s and I heard many different income generating strategies during that time but I never heard anyone base their strategy on a person who though he was rich, yet for other's sakes became poor, so that by his poverty others might become rich! But that's exactly what Paul does here. And we're glad

he does because it took him away from comparing one church's generosity with another's (that's what he did with reference to the Macedonian believers in the first five verses of chapter eight) and from flattering the Corinthians about the excellency of their faith which he did in verse 7 at the beginning of today's reading. Both such approaches are not helpful and I would imagine they would generally fall on deaf ears in the modern church. But the appeal to the example of Jesus Christ is very different. If we claim to follow Christ then we must take seriously an appeal to his way.

The Church of Scotland in its stewardship of the national church's giving, seems to me, to appeal to the spirit of Paul's theology here. Recently at the Presbytery Stewardship Conference held in St. James' Church, Archie McDowell, the assistant Treasurer of the Church of Scotland, spoke about how the Mission and Ministries' contribution which every Parish in Scotland is expected to give to, works. He made the point that in principle it is very simple. I'm not sure everyone was convinced, but I think he made a good case! He made the case for 'fair balance' which Paul made in verse 13 here.

Those who are able to give should, according to present abundance, that those who find themselves in current want are not left in that want. In that way there are some churches in Scotland who give in excess of £150,000 annually to central funds while some churches give less than £20,000. We might on the surface reckon that's just not fair. But by what measure do we make that judgement? I think the principle of those who have been 'blessed', or 'graced', as Paul might have put it, supporting those who find themselves in more barren places, is a good one. It is a principle that our national



church with a commitment to a territorial presence across the nation is committed to and it is good for us today to see that principle embedded in Scripture. But none of it is easy. We sometimes ask the question, “how much should we give?” Or to put into Paul’s language today, “what is a fair balance?” We may let ourselves off the hook with a token, “Well, I gave a little something!” What is going on behind all of that?

Lloyd C. Douglas told the story of Thomas Hearne, who, in his journey to the mouth of the Coppermine River, wrote that a few days after they had started on their expedition, a

party of native Americans stole most of their supplies. His comment on the apparent misfortune was: 'The weight of our baggage being so much lightened, our next day's journey was more swift and pleasant.'

Hearne was in route to something very interesting and important; and the loss of a few sides of bacon and a couple of bags of flour meant nothing more than an easing of the load. Had Hearne been holed in somewhere, in a cabin, resolved to spend his last days eking out an existence, and living on capital previously collected, the loss of

some of his stores by plunder would probably have worried him almost to death.<sup>2</sup> How we respond to "losing" some of our resources for God's work depends upon whether we are on the move or waiting for our last stand. We must always be people who are living light. Moving away from a crushing, stifling fear and on to a basis of trust that is taking us forward into God's new kingdom. We are people who must be orientated to the future and not stuck in a rear guard, digging in, kind of mentality. There's a wonderful quotation attributed to

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<sup>2</sup> Lloyd C. Douglas, *The Living Faith*

David Livingstone, the Scottish missionary and adventurer in Africa. He said, “I place no value on anything I have or may possess, except in relation to the kingdom of God. If anything will advance the interests of the kingdom, it shall be given away or kept, only as by giving or keeping it I shall most promote the glory of Him to whom I owe all my hopes in time or eternity.” It’s helpful in that it returns us to the life and example of Jesus who though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich. Amen.