

Stewardship Sunday, 14th August 2011 – ‘Joyful Living’
Reading: 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15

Our stewardship theme this year is ‘Joyful Living’ because stewardship is joyful, right? Don’t we find joy in giving? I chose this theme specifically because of today’s reading from 2nd Corinthians – the reading came first, then the theme – and in that reading, joy is central. Let me explain:

Paul is on a mission. He’s doing one of his marathon journeys, and as he travels he’s collecting funds for the Christians in Jerusalem. Why? Because Jerusalem was where the Church began, we discover that in Acts, and because a famine has hit the city hard. So Paul is travelling around the various Christian communities and as he travels he’s collecting funds to send back to Jerusalem, and what we find today is Paul is preparing to visit Corinth, which is a place he’s had experience of before, and not all of it positive.

Corinth seems to have been one of the earliest and most successful Christian communities in the early Church, and with its size came both significant resources and significant problems. 1st Corinthians spends a lot of time addressing the issues facing the church at Corinth, and Paul and his advice are not universally welcomed. Now he’s going back to Corinth and he knows they have the wealth and the ability to help the Jerusalem church, but he also knows that the Corinthians have a reputation for being difficult and just a bit tight.

Before he gets to Corinth, though, Paul visits Macedonia. Where the Corinthians were big and rich, the Macedonian churches small and almost exclusively poor, so much so that when Paul visited them he specifically didn’t ask them to contribute to his collection for Jerusalem. In fact we know that he exempted the Macedonians from any expectation of giving, but they gave anyway. And now, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, making it clear that he has an expectation they will contribute to his collection, he begins by telling them about these amazingly generous Macedonians, but he does so carefully, because Paul knows talking about money is dangerous, it upsets people. He could have played it tough – demanding they cough up for God – or he could have put on the guilt trip – these Macedonians give so much and you give so little – but instead he just tells a story.

“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”

Paul tells the story, and he frames that story with grace and joy. These are important, crucial, inextricably connected words in the New Testament. The Greek word for ‘grace’ is *charis* (haris), while for ‘joy’ it’s *chara* (hara). Haris and Hara – can we hear how similar they sound? They both come from the same root word and when we find them in Paul’s writing they belong together.

“For during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”

Do you remember Sesame Street? Something that has stayed with me since my childhood is the differences song, do you know it? ‘One of these things is not like the other ...’ that’s what’s going on here I think. One of these things isn’t like the others – ordeals, afflictions, poverty, joy. And not just joy, but abundant, overflowing joy. In the midst of oppression and trials and extreme poverty, the Macedonians have abundant, overflowing joy. Where is this joy coming from? We might ask where we usually find joy – family, friends, job, bank balance – but what if all those things vanished? What if, like the Macedonians, we found ourselves in the midst of oppression and trials and extreme poverty? One thing seems clear, the abundant joy in the Macedonian churches wasn’t coming from their day to day experiences. So where were they finding it?

“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia”.

What is grace? A freely given gift – that’s an important concept for us to grasp by itself, but in this reading it goes even further and takes on even more significance when we understand that in the original Greek what we hear this morning as “has been granted” is a passive tense verb. Amazing right? Because what that means is that the emphasis here is not on the giving, but on the receiving. So what we might more accurately hear in this reading is, “We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been received by the churches of Macedonia”. The emphasis is on the actions of the churches more than the actions of God.

So the Macedonians receive the grace of God and in that receiving they find a joy that is independent of their circumstances. But grammar fans among us will be blown away to learn that not only is this Greek phrase a passive tense verb, it’s also set in the perfect tense. And being in the perfect tense means it’s always here. The perfect tense describes something that happened in the past, and continues to happen in the present. Think of it like ringing a bell – we strike the bell once and it rings, but the sound continues to reverberate long after the striking. Or you could imagine it’s like a bottle of expensive perfume; you pump the bottle the perfume is sprayed, and afterwards the scent lingers. This grace that is received from God is like a perfume that lingers forever. And because this is also a passive tense verb, it means not only does it linger, but we are continually receiving it.

The abundant joy that comes from receiving God’s grace continues to be come every time we receive it, over and over and over again, and when we receive it, something happens to our lives: “For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.”

The Macedonians received God’s grace, and in it they found a joy independent of even their extreme poverty, and that joy was so abundant that it overflowed in generosity, so overwhelming that they found themselves giving beyond their means, and begging to give more. Grace leads to joy – excellent. But joy, it seems, leads automatically to giving. What we find here is that a generous life is basically a reflex action to experiencing the joy that comes from God’s grace. Stewardship, when we see it through this lens, is not about

meeting our obligations, it's about experiencing the outpouring of God's love for ourselves, and joining in that outpouring to others.

There's a vital principal to grasp hold of here, and it's one that's too often been perverted by some in the name of Jesus. If we think that by giving to others we can get more for ourselves, we need to think again. Yes, there appears to be an element of that in what Paul writes to the Corinthians here; grace leads to joy which leads to giving which leads to more joy, but the order is crucial.

It's like a hybrid car. Does anyone here drive a hybrid? How does it work? It has a battery that drives the pistons which turn the wheels. The problem with electric cars has always been that they need regular recharging. When the battery dies, they stop. What today's cars have, however, is this ingenious system in which the battery is charged by the friction that is caused when you apply the brakes. To be successful though, this system needs things to happen in the correct order. If I sit in my garage with my foot on the brake, nothing's going to happen. It all begins with the battery I need the battery to get me moving, so that when I apply the brakes, the battery gets charged.

The same is true with joy. We need to start by receiving God's grace, within which we will find a joy that will lead us to overflow with generosity, and as we live generously we will receive more joy – if the joy isn't there to begin with, giving won't help.

I think we sometimes spend too much time sitting in the garage waiting for the battery to charge. I think we need to receive the grace to get the joy to live the generous life and find more joy, but I think we often find ourselves looking in all the wrong places to begin with.

Today is Stewardship Sunday, and does that mean we're asking you to think about giving some money? Absolutely, but that's not our main focus this morning. What I really want to invite you to do is receive God's grace. I want to invite us to recognise the grace that God holds out to us constantly, and I want to invite us to look to that grace as the source of true joy - a joy we can hold on to even in the midst of profound trials and sorrows.

So may we receive that grace, may we find that joy, and may we find ourselves urged to pass it on. May we live grace-filled lives, joyful lives, generous lives. May we be blessed and a blessing, today and tomorrow, and for all our days to come. Amen.