

1 Samuel 1:20-28 - Samuel's Dedication

²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the LORD.' ²¹The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. ²²But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, 'As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the LORD, and remain there for ever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time.' ²³Her husband Elkanah said to her, 'Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only—may the LORD establish his word.' So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. ²⁴When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh; and the child was young. ²⁵Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. ²⁶And she said, 'Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. ²⁷For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. ²⁸Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD.' She left him there for the LORD.

Luke 2:22-33 - Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon;[Ⓜ] this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.[Ⓜ] ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon[Ⓜ] came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon[Ⓜ] took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹'Master, now you are dismissing your servant[Ⓜ] in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon[Ⓜ] blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

Sermon

I want to begin today's sermon in our series by reminding you of a couple of the key points we have made so far. We began by reflecting on the nature of God. God is love, We love because God loves us first, and we give because God first gives to us. Jenny and I have talked about the only two commands we are really given: to love God with ALL our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourself. Last week Irene used the Christmas Carol 'In the bleak mid-winter' as an example of knowing what to give, and first and foremost we are to give our heart.

So this morning we have a Gospel reading set for us as the lectionary reading for Candlemas and I have chosen to go with it the from Samuel as a bit of a compare and contrast. In both readings we have the presentation and dedication of the first-born son to the Lord as was prescribed in the Law of Moses. And in both cases that dedication is accompanied by a sacrificial gift.

Last week Irene talked about the need to sacrificially give our time and our talents in the service of God. This week I want to talk about financial giving. And this should not come as a surprise. Giving to the church has been part of discipleship since before there was any such thing as the church. It was part of worship in the Jewish temple, just as it is part of our worship in Christ's church.

The economy of previous centuries was different to ours. Money was used by merchants in trade, but it was less important than it is today. There was far more direct exchange of goods. Farmers did not sell their produce and then give 10% of the proceeds to the church. They gave 10% of their produce.

As an example I give you this extract from the records of Cogenhoe church in 1702

All grass ground in the meadows and Common fields tithable in kind. The Pastures when lying to grass pay rent, when ploughed pay tithe in kind. Milk, Calves, Wool, Lambs, Pigs, Orchards, Gardens, Eggs, Honey, all due in kind.

That's why, in years past, all villages had tithe barns, into which 10% of all produce from the land would be brought.

In today's economy we have a different way of working. Teachers, Health-workers, factory workers and IT technicians cannot give 10% of their harvest in the same way. For the majority of us our "harvest" comes in the form of a pay-cheque at the end of the week or month. And it is from this that we give to support the work of the church, as part of our discipleship and our worship.

Joseph and Mary gave two turtle doves, the prescribed gift of a poor person. Hannah's gift by contrast might seem extravagant, mostly made up of the value of a 3 year old. To put this into perspective in today's money, A bull that is kept for 3 years is probably not being raised for meat, it is kept for breeding, and it would typically be worth about £3,000-4,000. But that is for a typical bull. For a prize winning pedigree you would pay more and I believe the current record for a prize winning Limousin is £126,00. The animals used in sacrifice were perfect and blemish free, so we are talking in the prize-winning range more than the typical range.

Compare the expensive perfume Mary poured over Jesus' feet and the widow's mite. The point is that each of these, within their means gave generously. But what is generously? I believe the starting point is the tithe – and the biblical tithe is 10%, Of course in today's world we have other charities that also compete for our money and the Church of England recognises this. The alternative tithe to give half of the normal tithe 5% to the church and the other half, 5%, to your own chosen charities. But whether you give 10% or 5 % to the church, there are some other important biblical principles as well.

First. 10% is not the target to aim for, it is the base level to start from. The giving of a bull or two turtle doves when dedicating the first-born son in the temple was the prescribed offering. Any "free-will" offering was on top of that.

Second, the giving of the tithe should be planned, it should be regular and it should be the first 10%. If you have looked at you weekly or monthly income, worked out 10% and then put into place a system for ensuring that you give that first before paying for anything else, then I say well done, you are walking a disciples path. But if you come to church on a Sunday morning, open your wallet or purse and see what is inside before deciding what to give, then you are not giving God your first 10%, you are giving him the dregs from the bottom of the barrel. If you have decided in advance how much you should give when you come to church each week, and bring it with you when you come to put in the plate, that is good. But what if you miss a week at church because you are on holiday or too busy or ill, or you forget to bring it with you? Do you put in double next time or does God miss out? Honestly?

Now, I know there are some people in our benefice who give more than 10% of their income to the church. I don't know their names, and I don't want to. I also know there are some people who are not giving as much as they THINK they are, because their giving is ad-hoc – when they come. That is why I commend to you the new Parish Giving Scheme. Most of you already pay your electricity bill, your water rates, your council tax, your TV licence by direct debit. Shouldn't you be paying your church tithe the same way? It is very easy to set up and it begins with asking your church treasurer for a form. If you are already on the old Peterborough Diocese standing order scheme you need to change over anyway. The new scheme is better for the diocese and the parish and you, and the old scheme is being closed down at the end of the year. Using the Parish Giving Scheme means that your giving is planned.

If you give using the envelopes, and you want to continue putting cash into envelopes that is fine. Continue using the envelopes BUT you need to ask the treasurer to give you numbered envelopes. If your income is paid monthly you only need 12 a year but if your income is weekly you probably need 52. Then you can put your tithe offering into the envelope at home, when you are paid, and bring the full ones to church when you come. That way you can easily keep track of how much you have given, and your giving is planned and not ad-hoc.

But remember this: above all that we give because God first gave to us. Primarily he gave His only Son who allowed himself to be nailed to a cross and died for you, so that you might live for ever. And remember also that what we give back was God's to begin with, as the offertory prayer says, EVERYTHING in heaven and earth comes from you and of YOUR OWN do we give you.

OK, so I have talked quite a lot this morning about money, about planned giving and tithing, but I make no apologies for that. In fact, if I need to apologise for anything, it is that I do not talk about it enough! Giving is part of discipleship. There a few other things that I want to talk about regarding stewardship and efficient giving. I have heard people say I do not give so much money because I give in other ways. Well giving in other ways is good. And last week Irene talked about giving time and talents. But I say these should also be tithed. You should be giving at least 10% of your time and effort in giving your God given talents back to God. Discipleship is not a commitment to turn up to church for one hour a month or even one hour a week, until you get bored with it or fall out with the vicar. Discipleship is a lifelong commitment to following Jesus and obeying God's command to love him with all your heart mind soul and strength. In other words, to love him totally. So giving your time and talents and money is not an either-or. You should be giving both.

And then finally stewardship is about looking after what God has given you and making sure you get the best value from your giving. And believe it or not, in this country we have a friendly and helpful tax system when it comes to giving. If you are donating flowers for church on a regular basis, or petrol for the lawn mower or coffee and biscuits or cakes, or paper for news-sheets, on a regular basis, and NOT claiming back your expenses, then stop it! You should be claiming back this money because it is part of the cost of running the church. And if you really don't want that money back, if you consider it to be part of your giving, then when you receive your expenses from the treasurer, put it into a gift aid envelope, if you pay tax, or loose into the plate if you don't as a donation to the church. That way we can claim back the gift aid for it. Instead of you donating £10 worth of petrol or coffee or flowers, the church gets an effective donation of £12.50. and those £2.50s add up.

When Jesus called his disciples to follow him they left their boats and followed him. They were fishermen, their boats were their livelihood. It cost them financially to follow Jesus and we should be of the same mind.

When Hannah presented Samuel in the temple with gifts of flour and wine and a bull, When Joseph and Mary presented Jesus in the temple with that poor persons gift of two turtle doves they each were giving generously, as they could afford, and what was expected of them. No one expected Mary to use expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet, it was totally a free will gift of love. All them gave their gifts gladly in thanks for God's blessing and gift to them. And once again I say, when we give, we should be of the same mind

Amen