

## Vicar's Sermon Sunday 18 January 2009 8.00 / 9.30am

A few weeks before Christmas, building on the thank-you Christmas cards which Mr Andrew Mills was sending out to everyone in our 'planned financial giving scheme' - the **Promised Offerings**, it was decided to reinforce that appreciation by inviting those to a series of thank you parties in the Vicarage. There have been 4 such parties already and 130 people have accepted and the 5<sup>th</sup> is tomorrow evening.

Today's sermon builds again on the experience of those thank - you events and our reflection and I want to extend a 'thank -you' to **everyone** who contributes to St Mary's in whatever way. Giving to the Church comes in different forms, we know -time voluntarily given, talents and financial support. I shall return to time and talents shortly but for now I focus on the money given to St Mary's and what expenditure we incur on your behalf.

If you place cash in the collection plate – Thank you! We received £11,000 in that way last year. If you give by being a member of the Planned Giving Scheme, for which Andrew Mills is the Promised Offering Recorder – thank-you, thank-you and thank-you again! For the benefits of giving in this way, as the yellow leaflet explains, are threefold and I commend it to everyone, who can possibly use it.

1. Your giving is **planned** over the year, considered and paid annually, monthly or weekly and does not depend on remembering to bring enough cash to church.
2. Your **regular** payments, preferably by direct debit or weekly envelopes ensure the voluntary Treasurer, Mr Mark Hackforth-Jones, can predict flows of income and match the bills, which certainly come monthly as **regular as clockwork**.
3. If you pay any UK tax, by filling in the Gift Aid section, your donation is worth about 28p in the £ **more** -at no extra cost to you. And if you are a higher rate taxpayer, the same applies and you get to keep the equivalent extra value as well.

Please do take away - read and digest the yellow leaflet and if not in the planned giving scheme, please seriously consider it - complete the form and return as indicated to the Promised Offering Recorder. Be assured the amount of your giving remains confidential between you and he only and while I know the names of who is in the scheme, I do not see the amounts. It was because I had sight of the list of names that I **could** send out invitations to the thank – you parties and if you are a member of the scheme, currently 140 individuals or couples and your invitation got lost in the Christmas post - please let me know. I also hope that you will understand how I **could not** invite those who give cash in the plate anonymously, as I have no way of knowing who gives in that way. Clearly I don't have binoculars and I don't intend to start! The basis of our Christian giving to the Church is clearly as a freely given, voluntary gift – we are not taxed for Church as they are in Germany, nor do we have plans to emulate Waterloo Station which has introduced ticket barriers which only allow those who have paid to enter!

One Lady was very surprised at the thank-you party when she discovered that not everyone who comes to church is **in** the planned giving scheme. With raised eyebrows she asked: 'Don't you have to be? Does not everybody give in a regular planned way, according to their means?' That, I said, is my hope and expectation and added that we are not taxed for Church as they are in Germany. The C of E relies on the giving of the living Church. Gone are the days when everything was paid by legacies and a few very wealthy benefactors. That is not to say however that legacies and bequests paid after our death are not a valuable contribution to our ongoing finances. They clearly are and the yellow leaflet gives some help in this regard – as we all might include the Church in our Wills. Why limit our giving to the extent of our earthly life when a legacy can help support what we cherish, after we've gone?

At the back of Church and on display in the hall are some colour pie charts, thanks to Carline and Barbara for producing, which show where our money comes from and where it goes. Last year, for example, 1% of our income came from unrestricted legacies and a further one for specific purposes. In short, our total income last year was £150,000 and we are budgeted to spend, **after inflation** (and I shall return to that in a minute) £156,000 this year or £3,000 per week.

Apart from the Parish Secretary salary, the music, running expenses of the Church like insurance, heat and light and our outward giving to 5 charities which are all sending speakers to the 9.30am Service on February 15<sup>th</sup>, when we will hear what they do with our money, the largest share of our expenditure, 67% goes to what is called the Southwark Parish Fairer Share. St. Mary's contribution to a central fund which pays the salaries or stipends, as they are called, of the clergy, me included, currently at the rate of £22,000 per year. The basis of the fund is simple - that richer parishes like us pay more than our costs and poorer parishes pay less – and the equality comes out in that all the clergy are paid the same. Arguably nothing could be fairer.

To put faces and places to how this Fairer Share Scheme works, take a stroll down to the hall after the Service today and you can see a short 11 minute DVD, thanks to Barbara Moreland's technology, being projected which shows some of the parishes and projects being funded, in part from our money. PCC members all have copies - do ask them if you would like to borrow a copy and when finished with it, please return to the back table. As the Vicar of Putney, whose parish pays a £ quarter of a million into the fund, who narrates the DVD says, quoting the Archbishop of Canterbury, who poses, as ever, a thoughtful and provoking question:

*'For whom is our money Good News?'* (repeat)

Other claims on our money in the budget, include of course, heating bills which as we know at home, have been getting bigger - and here is a good example of how giving to the planned giving, Promised Offering Scheme is preferable to putting cash in the plate. Cash in the plate depends on you being in church – and very few of us come to church 52 weeks per year but the heating bill to keep the church warm is exactly the same whether you or I are in church or not! The bills are regular – let's see more people being part of the Planned regular Giving Scheme.

I am not going to hold up a figure which everybody should aspire to give because I know people's ability to pay varies enormously. For example, some might give £20 per month and others give £150 or more per month - and many more inbetween. All I ask is that each of us, me included and I have completed mine and handed to Andrew, **gives according to our means - regularly, gladly and with generosity.** A guide which you might find helpful, depending on your lifestyle could be giving the equivalent cost of 2 bottles of wine per week or similar. And how much that works out at depends on how expensive is your choice of wine. That is just an example.

Other claims on our budget include a decision by the finance committee recently to invest more in our Sunday Club, with better teaching materials and perhaps training for the leadership of what is an important part of our work. And here I take off my hat, if I had one, to those parents who give currently of their time and talent to lead, under Sarah Wright and help run the creche and Sunday Club – vital as it is to the children present, to our Church as a whole and for all our futures. Others give of their free time and talents too – members of the choir, bellringers, sidesmen, pastoral visitors, readers, altar party, churchyard, glebe, magazine, flower arrangers, PCC members and I could go on..... Whatever else the C of E is, it is essentially at its local parish roots, a voluntary body. A few of us, yes are employed but by and large it is the generosity of your time, talents and money which combine to enable the work to flourish.

### 3.

In two weeks time, 1<sup>st</sup> February at the Feast of Candlemas or **Presentation** of Christ in the Temple at either 8.00am or 10am, I urge you all to come and those who are making a Promised Offering for the first time, to put your completed form in a sealed envelope and place in the collection plate as it goes round, or hand to Andrew Mills if you prefer, and those Promised Offerings will be included in our offertory, accompanied by a special offertory prayer which is printed on the pewsheet today. Not only newcomers to the scheme, but those who have been part of it for several years now - remember the effects of inflation – the passage of time since you set the amount you give – will have been eroded by inflation, so now is a time to reconsider and I hope increase your promised offering, if you can.

This 'push' is not just about balancing the books, though that is one of our aims, remembering that 11% of our income last year came from interest on investments, which this year will be halved due to interest rate cuts. Acknowledging too that some have been made redundant and will have to rethink their finances and giving, you might conclude that, in a recession, this is very bad timing Vicar! I do not think so, for 3 reasons:

1. Evidence shows that charities, including churches, largely maintained income during past recessions.
2. If some are or will be made redundant, it is all the more important that the majority of us in work or in receipt of pension or pensions, don't look the other way when it comes to giving.
3. As I said, a large part of what we give helps others less fortunate than ourselves and the recession is sure to hurt them more. Let St Mary's not be among those who cut and run when times get tough but be steadfast and consistent in our response.

And finally, the Christian motivation to our giving surely informs and inspires us. Our giving is not a tax - nor the equivalent of a train ticket – there are no ticket inspectors passing through the pews – we don't use the language of 'fare dodgers' but we do hope none, for long, just come for a free ride! Our giving is not from the loose change in our pockets and purses – it is not the equivalent of bringing to Harvest Festival a half mouldy tomato from the bottom of the fridge or an out of date tin of beans – no – it is a response out of **gladness**, to offer from the **1<sup>st</sup>** and of the **best** of what we have to offer.

We stand in a stream of tradition, indeed sit under a roof and between arches, some of the **best** that architecture could devise – we behold the beauty of **great** art depicted in stained glass and ecclesiastical design – and we praise God with the **best** music we can sing. The Christian spirit of our giving could well be inspired from the best of Harvest traditions when it was the duty and the joy of poorest peasant and richest landowner alike, to offer the **best** and the **first** fruits of their harvest. So let our prayer be:

'Bless then O, Lord and increase the work of this congregation.  
Strengthen newcomers in our midst and **stir up** within us **all**  
the will to be faithful followers of your Son -  
**gladdened** to be a part of your Kingdom.' Amen

*Revd John A Hayward  
Vicar of St Mary, Merton  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany  
18.1.2009*