

PARTICIPATING IN THE GENEROSITY OF GOD – FR JOHN SPRING – 21 FEBRUARY 2010

1st SUNDAY OF LENT

Readings: Deuteronomy 26. 1-11, Psalm 91. 1-2, 9-16, Romans 10. 4-13, Luke 4. 1-15

In our first reading today, we are reminded of the Hebrew law of first fruits, which, if you read on to the end of the chapter from which it comes, you will see was a tithe, a tenth of the harvest. This was set aside and taken to the priests for it to be distributed to the families of the priests, to the resident aliens, and to orphans and widows. The Levitical priesthood was included because, originally, the Tribe of Levi were given no allocation of land and the priests and their families had to be sustained by the other eleven tribes.

Christians maintain this principle today inasmuch as the ordained clergy are provided with a house to live in, a phone and utilities, and a car to drive and they are paid “stipend” rather than salary. That is, they are paid an allowance which will keep them in food and clothes and other things they need and which will free them from the need to get paid work to maintain themselves and their family. In rural communities, priests also often receive gifts of food from those who wish to welcome, support, care for and encourage them in a person to person way. I had a farmer and his wife in my last parish in Queensland who would regularly drop in with bananas, herbs and vegetables from their garden.

The purpose of the tithe of first fruits required by the Hebrew law was to enable the whole nation to celebrate together the bounty that the Lord had bestowed upon those who had land and established farms, flocks and herds. The poor and needy were to be given a share in that bounty. In this way God relied upon those human beings upon whom he bestowed wealth to share it with others. They did not do it in their own name and because they were especially kind, loving and caring, but they did it **in his name and because he commanded them**. In other words, what this law did was to ensure that everyone in Israel appreciated **the generosity of God**.

The Hebrew law of the tithe of a tenth of the first fruits reminds us, as Christians, that, during Lent, we are also called upon to increase our giving to those who are in need – the homeless, the refugee, the marginalised, the poor among us, as well as the poor and needy in other countries, and those who work among these people in missions and in aid and relief organisations. We do this, not because *we* are generous or good, but **because God is**. God gives us a part to play in his providence, in providing for others out of what he has given us, and in revealing, to those who receive what we give, God’s goodness and generosity.

Jesus himself said, “No-one is good but God alone” and this word “good” implies generosity. “The rain falls upon the just and the unjust” – that is, God’s merciful rain falls upon the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the wicked and the righteous – and Jesus commands us to “be perfect” in the same way, just “as your heavenly Father is perfect”.

Lent, then, is not about self-absorbed piety, about wrapping ourselves up in our own holiness and parading our religiosity before others. It is about God-moved generosity towards those upon whom God wishes to bestow a share in the riches he gives – yes, food and clothes and houses to live in, and opportunities for education, employment and personal development within community, but also the **spiritual riches**, above all the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What then are your first fruits *in the Gospel*? And how will you share them with those who have less, little or nothing at all of these?

IN the second reading, from Romans 10, in verse 4, we are told that, through Christ, the riches of *righteousness* are for everyone *who believes*. It does not just say “for everyone”, that is, indiscriminately. God does not simply make everyone righteous in his sight. The love of God is unconditional, but salvation

is not and this reading today says the righteousness God wants to bestow on human beings is “for everyone *who believes*”. Jesus removes the requirement of the law which says that only those can enjoy the good things God gives if they keep the entire law, law by law. Yet Jesus also brings a new requirement: that is, as Paul teaches, the riches of righteousness in Christ are for *those who believe*.

But is it only a matter of believing? The answer is “No” as Paul explains, saying ,

... if **you confess with your lips** that Jesus is Lord and **believe in your heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one **confesses with the mouth and so is saved.**”

In verse 12, Paul is very clear that “the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all **who call upon him**”. He does not say God is generous to all regardless. He does not say God saves everyone no questions asked. No, rather, as Paul says in verse 13 “Everyone **who calls on the name of the Lord** shall be saved.”

What does it mean, then, to call on the name of the Lord? As I read Paul it certainly means gathering together in worship to speak and sing the praises of God and to pray to God our Father in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ. Yet it also means **to tell other people**, people out there, people who do not come to worship, about Jesus.

So it is that Paul goes on to make plain our obligation, as people who believe in their hearts, **to confess with our lips and to tell others**. This way, it may be that they too will come to believe and then to call on the Lord’s name and to spread the word further. If we do not seek and take ways to *declare our faith to others*, we may believe in our hearts and so be justified in our relationship with God, but *we are not confessing with our mouth* and therefore, applying Paul’s rule, we are not saved!

Now Paul quotes Isaiah to say that “Not all have obeyed the good news”. What he means is that not everyone who has had the Gospel declared to them has accepted it and come to believe in Jesus. True enough! Not all are justified, let alone saved. However, if **we** only believe and do not declare, we too are not obeying the Good News and the commandment of God. We may well be on better terms with God and feel easier about approaching him with our prayers and praises – that is, we are **justified** – but if we do not go out to tell people out there about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are **not saved**. We shall live easier, and get on better with God, but we shall die just as they do who hear the Gospel but refuse to accept it.

During Lent, then, we are called to make a greater effort in our Christian lives and this is a terribly important part of it – that we believe with our heart and be justified, and **that we confess with our lips and be saved**.

THIS then brings us to the Gospel for today, St Luke’s version of the temptation of our Lord in the wilderness. How, I ask myself, do we connect this episode in Jesus’ life with the command of God, declared in the first two readings, to reveal God’s generosity, and to share a tithe of the monetary, material, cultural, intellectual, moral, spiritual and religious riches he has bestowed upon us?

You may be able to see links I cannot see and I would be glad to hear what those links are for you. However, I can at least begin with Jesus’ three responses to the devil, all from Scripture:
How do these connect with the first and second readings?

1. “One does not live by bread alone.”

In what does your life consist, if not material provision alone? The obvious answer from St Paul today would be salvation, that is, **eternal life**. Material provision will sustain you in this world, but what thereafter? And living on “bread alone” will allow you to accomplish much in this world, but it will not raise up eternal life in you now and lead you to eternal life after death. If you live for bread and by bread, you will

die, not only physically, but spiritually. What the readings, taken together, say to me is that what we must desire is **the bread of salvation**, the true and living bread which came down from heaven. But more than that, we must also **share this living bread with others** that they and you might live eternally.

2. “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

At the least this means do not worship and serve yourself. However it also means that there is worship and there is service. The service of God, doing the works of God, as Jesus teaches us, is firstly, believing in his Son *and* secondly, loving one another above, all within the Church, just as he loved us – that is laying down our lives for each other, putting ourselves out for each other. However, thirdly, it is also **carrying the Gospel of salvation** to those who have not heard it.

We are to be **doers** and not only hearers. We are also to be **speakers** and not only believers. We are to be saved and not only justified. So to worship the Lord your God means to tell other people about him and what he has done to save you from spiritual and eternal death, and to share that generous good news.

3. “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Perhaps these words could mean “Don’t go to extremes”. I have never had the impression that *many* Anglicans were in danger of doing this, but occasionally one does meet one who needs to hear this warning against extremism. I think, for example, of a man named Barry. He was a People’s Warden of a parish which was having a Planned Giving Program run by a parishioner of ours, Ron Cameron, and his Christian stewardship company **Planned Growth Australia**. Ron and Marie live in Blairgowrie, worship at St John’s Sorrento and run the company out of their home.

I have to tell you that this stewardship campaign followed hard upon the death of the former priest who used to collect used bottles, trying to fund this church which was in a very wealthy parish, and Barry felt all this very deeply as something shameful. Anyway, when it came time for people to make their pledges, this man Barry decided to set an example of faith and commitment for the rest of the parish. He pledged his family to make a very large weekly offering to God, despite the Parish Priest urging him not to overreach himself. He insisted that, if he gave a full tithe of all his income before tax, plus free will offerings on top of that to the church and to missions, and put his hand into his pocket as he did for this and that around the church, God would supply his need. He was confident that he would prosper, and the jar of meal would never run out and the cruet of oil would never run dry. Moreover, other people would be inspired and imitate him and the church would prosper and flourish.

However, what Barry expected to happen for him did not, and the burden of that commitment told on him, more and more. It also weighed upon him that other people had not matched his generosity. A year or two on, with the strain of meeting his commitment telling on his family and his business, he had to go through the humiliating experience of revising his commitment downward by a lot, and that truly hurt. He was ashamed. He wondered whether his faith was not strong enough. He questioned the teachings on which he had based his decisions. He was shaken, inside and out.

Now, as I say, I don’t know many people in our church who are in that kind of danger and I certainly don’t know of anyone here. Yet, you may, and for anyone who does fall into the trap of trying to force God’s hand – whether it is in the hours they give working around the church, or in charitable works in the community, or the money they give, or the healing they expect to receive by virtue of their faith – that person has slipped into the sin of putting the Lord your God to the test.

So the advice in Lent is always that the Lenten disciplines you undertake must never be to test God, to make him keep his promises as *you* understand them, and to confirm your will. If you do go to excess in any

aspect of Lenten discipline – in fasting, or prayer, or giving, or works of mercy, or reading and studying the bible – you will not only *not* get the benefits, but you will actually fall into sin - which, of course, is one reason why we Christians do not ash our faces and wear sackcloth for 40 days and 40 nights. There is too much danger of spiritual exhibitionism and manipulation in that. So Jesus teaches us that those who *parade* their religiosity and piety and faith, whatever their higher motives, also do so to impress others. And they *do* impress them but, truly, in getting others to admire them, and even imitate them, they have received all the reward they will get. God is not impressed!

May God inspire and guide you in your Lenten disciplines. May you desire, above all things, the rewards God wants to bestow upon you. And as you are rewarded, share the generosity of God with others, that his praises might be sung and others may believe and be justified, confess and be saved.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John Spring