EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY

As you will know, we are currently working through Robert Schnase's book called Five Practices of Fruitful Living. So far we have walked through:

How we receive God's Love - Radical Hospitality
How we love God in return – Passionate worship
How we develop our Faith- Growing in Grace
How we practice risk-Taking Mission – Growing in Grace.

We have discovered that;

Through the practice of Radical hospitality we receive God and invite God into our lives. By practicing Passionate Worship we love God in return; God shapes our hearts and minds as we begin to see the world through his eyes. We cooperate with the Holy Spirit in our own spiritual growth as we practice Intentional Faith Development. God calls us all to make a difference in the lives of others, and we practice Risk-Taking Mission and service. And at some point in our following of Christ, we realise all that we are comes from God and belongs to God; this leads us to the practice of Extravagant Generosity.

Perhaps at this stage of this sermon series we should put a great big poster up displaying these 5 principles.

What about Extravagant Generosity. It sounds a little excessive. We all put something in the plate or we transfer something by bank transfer. We put in what we can afford, or what we believe we can afford.

If we look to scripture, we see hundreds of spiritual stories, parables and verses that focus on possessions, wealth, poverty, giving, gifts, offerings, tithes, charity, sacrifice, generosity and sharing with those in need.

The Old Testament tells of the people presenting their first fruits to the purposes of God. Abram offered a Tithe or 10% of everything; The Psalms and Proverbs are full of encouragement to share the gifts of God with the poor and needy. Jesus teaches of the widow placing her two coins into the temple treasury – placing all she had into God's use. He also teaches of the wealthy farmer who saves all his wealth in a barn, and when the barns are full – builds more barns to fill. He failed to understand what really made him richer in God's eyes.

We see a strong theological basis for giving. No justification for keeping.

When we think of Generosity, we should also remember the generosity that God has shown.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' John 3.16

God gave us everything, without hesitation. Everything we have comes from God.

At times of course, we are human and we forget this. We often get caught up in the world and the pressure the world places on us. We can

forget that everything we have comes from God and believe that we earn the things we have and the money we have. We work hard for our money and possessions and we deserve them. In many ways this attitude does not change with the level of earning. In a recent survey it was discovered that everyone would be happy if they had only 20% more money than they have. So, if we earn 1000 euros a month, we would be really content if we had 1200. If we earned 2000 a month, we would be happy with 2400. I'm not sure that works. If we earn more, we would then wish for more. In my experience many people are not content with what they have; they always want more.

Of course, some people come to realise that possessions are not everything and that striving after more and more can be much harder than accepting what they have and living within their means. I am sure we are all aware of people who get used to earning and spending and to whom life style and possessions are more important than integrity and happiness. There are many people who live false lives based on taking out loans and living off credit cards rather than a balancing the family account every week and month.

Often, it is only when people get to a crisis, either financially or mentally that they are forced to face up to the fact that money does not bring happiness. We need to have our lives in balance and that balance includes understanding that everything that we have, large or small, comes from God. And we should be Extravagant in giving it back.

Paul said 'Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? Its way over our heads… everything comes from him; everything happens through him; everything ends with him' (Rom 11. 33-36)

So, what about giving?
We know that some give because they believe that giving helps the congregation or community that they feel part of. They see themselves as beneficiaries of what is happening in that place and want to contribute to support it. This giving can be functional; it need not be money but can be time or talent. The fruit of this is tangible and visible. Churches with generous members can offer more, they can do more, j7u and they can achieve more.

Giving can align us with God's purposes; it aligns those who give with what God wants them to do in the world. When some people think about what they should give, they are asking a much deeper question; what does God want me to do, what is his plan for me? Through this, the individuals learn what God wants of them and they can align themselves to his will. If you do not ask the question, you will never know the answer.

Giving can, of course, change us inside. When we think of what we should give and how, it forces us to balance the priorities in our lives. The priorities for our money, for our time and our talents. If we give, we are generous and see the effect of our giving, then the greed we have will dimininish. If we begin to use our times with others, any self-centredness will disappear. The opposite of generosity is greediness, selfishness, self-centredness, and self-absorption. These are not the qualities that lead to life and so by our giving we cultivate a different person inside.

Of course, giving reflects God's nature. We saw earlier that God is a generous God who gives everything to us. It is his nature to give and, if we also become generous, we reflect his nature.

Giving also helps us with our relationship to money and our talents. In the society we live in, people enjoy possessions. People seem to enjoy having a better quality of life than others. I have a better house, I have a better car. I dress better because I can afford to. When we become extravagantly generous, we begin to affect other people's lives and we begin to realise that improving the way others are able to live and work through their lives, is much more rewarding than comparing apartments, clothes or cars.

Tolstoy told the story of a farmer who was always on the look for better land. He starts off on the farm left by his father and farmed by his family for generations. He hears there is land available in another region of good quality at a low price, so he sells up and moves. Still he is dissatisfied. Then he hears of a land where you pay the king for a chance to walk the perimeter of the land you will own. So he sells up again and went to meet the king. After paying his money he placed a stake in the ground and at dawn set off to walk the perimeter of the land that would become his. He had to make sure there was plenty of time to get back before sunset. But as he walked, he spotted pasture that was exceptional and so extended his walk so it could be included. He then spotted a beautiful area of fruit trees that would be ideal and so extended his walk again, although now going much faster. As the sun sets he sees that he has miscalculated and will have to go very quickly to get back to the post in time. He runs harder to reach the stake, but collapses and dies within meters of it, just as the sun is setting. How much land does a man need? Tolstoy answers about 2 meters from head to foot.

It is God's nature to have sufficient, not to be greedy.

Giving also deepens our relationship with God. When we give we must think of what and who we are giving to. It is not totally pointless to give without thought, but I suspect it is not particularly efficient. Say one beggar in Munich gets all the donations and the remainder get nothing. It certainly makes one person very happy, but the rest remain hungry. If we think about what we are giving and where we should give it, it is natural to turn to God in prayer and ask what we should offer and how and to whom it should be offered. This conversation with God continues the development of our relationship with God and deepens our relationship.

Of course, Giving honours the Sacrifice that Christ made. By giving we also participate in the self-giving we see in the example that Christ left us. He was willing to sacrifice all, we are asked to give a bit, to sacrifice a little.

This is the time of year when the church asks us all to reflect on giving, on our Stewardship; be it what we do, what talents we use or what our wealth is. It seems to come at the time of year when we also have to begin sorting out our taxes and such issues.

The reading this morning shows us Jesus standing again in front of the Pharisees, again with the Pharisees trying to catch him out. Should they pay their taxes? Jesus' response is simple, yet complex. After asking whose face is on the coin, he replies "Then give Caesar what is his, and

give God what is his." It is our duty to give to society and government what we owe and it is our duty to give to God. In a way the difference is more complex. The coin has the face of Caesar and so it can be seen as his. But, everything we have is from God, and so to God we must be Extravagant with our generosity. The government doesn't thank you if you pay too much tax, God does thank you through the changes in people's lives, the relieving of their burdens, the sick being healed and the prisoners being freed.

Over the last few weeks we have looked through these Five Principles of radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Faith Development, Mission and Service and Extravagant Generosity. It doesn't seem much when stated like that, but I believe it is the most important journey that any of us will ever take.

God invites us to meet him with Radical Hospitality, we respond to this huge invitation by Passionate Worship, getting to know him. We then continue and develop our understanding by Developing our Faith and getting to know him and his will better. Then we must respond. We know what he wants in our lives and for our lives and so we must move towards Risk-Taking Mission and the Extravagant Generosity that affects the lives of others.

A fantastic journey; a journey that God invites us to join. If we meet God and respond to him then this church and this city and this world will be in much better place. So remember, when we think about what we should give, think about what God wants us to give, what he needs and what the benefit of our generosity will be. Then think of what he gave us. This response can be in money, or in time or in talent. Your response can be recognised by filling out the time and talent sheets given out last week.

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can
In all the ways you can
In all the places you can
At all the times you can
To all the people you can
As long as ever you can

Wesley