

The Diocese of Winchester

Our Calling Under God



HARVEST STEWARDSHIP SERIES

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Introduction

'Giving in Grace' is now being widely used across the Diocese to encourage stewardship. We are enormously grateful to Liverpool Diocese for making this excellent resource available to the wider church. Some local additional input, it is thought, may also be of value.

The idea of producing a series of sermons tied into the gospel readings around the season when churches celebrate Harvest came from Revd. Neil Smart. We are very grateful to Neil for the idea. We are also enormously grateful to the 5 brave souls who have contributed the sermons.

I was asked to act as 'Editor'. I have taken a very light touch approach to avoid losing any of the distinctiveness of style, understanding and approach found in the sermons. I have, on occasions, added some additional material. How they are to be used is entirely down to each local community. They are a resource for use – no less, and no more, than that. Speaking personally I always have to make a sermon 'my own' but would very happily use the shape, and some of the illustrations offered in these; indeed where appropriate I will do so over these weeks.

One writer has offered an all age talk alongside their adult one (Luke 15.1-10). If you decided to use this for an all age harvest then you might want to shift the order of talks around to fit in with timings of harvest celebrations.

The range of background reading and resources used by the 5 writers is quite broad and obviously the commentaries referred to in any 1 week could be used throughout the series.

Material has been supplied for Small Group use. Small groups are run in many different styles so it is suggested that the offerings here are taken and turned into the local house style. (e.g. Cell based groups using the 4 'Ws' will probably want to include an Icebreaker welcome each week, and suggestions for worship and witness; prayer group styles will want to offer thoughts for intercessions etc.)

It is our hope and prayer that these sermons and notes will prove to be of value in many parishes across the Diocese this September and October, as we celebrate God's generosity to us in Harvest; and as we continue to explore together what it means for us all to be a Generous Community.

Paul Butler

Bishop of Southampton

Special thanks to the following five people who willingly contributed their time, energy, gifts and skills to help produce this sermon series:

- The Revd Andrew Bishop
- Mr Charlie Shaylor
- Mr Rupert Shelley
- The Revd Richard Thompson
- The Revd Peter Vargeson

September 9

Luke Chapter 14. vs. 25 – 33:- The Cost of being a disciple

Sermon

Imagine you are a newspaper editor. This gospel passage from St Luke has just landed on your desk. You have to write a headline for it: what would that headline be? Just recall, Jesus makes some colossal demands upon the large crowds who are following him, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brother or sister, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.' (14.26) He goes on to give some very practical wisdom on the undertaking of an enterprise building a tower or planning a military campaign. How about this as a headline? - Planning and paying.

Planning and paying. Actually it is not the most motivational of headlines; it may be okay for a Chancellor of the Exchequer but is it really going to set our imaginations on fire with a burning passion to be generous in building up God's kingdom? Or in reaching out to the poor and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ?

So how might we unpack the idea of planning to fire us up? The whole corporate world, the world of schools and education and even the church is caught up in the language of planning, strategy and looking forward. Guess what, Jesus was on to that one some time ago. In this passage of St Luke's gospel he is clear about the plans and the strategy that we need to put into place when it comes to our discipleship. It is an all embracing vision one that says that we have to let go before we can give.

First then let's think about how God has shown that he is a bit of a strategist. God has form on strategic planning and its consequences. After all to love the creation into being is a great strategic goal, and the consequences of the freedom given to that creation meant that God would exercise his lavish generosity in loving it back to him. The cost of that is revealed in the cross of Jesus; a cross which any disciple or follower of his is bound to pick up daily and walk with. God has given everything for our lives, our faith and our trust.

It's funny how there are lots of things we plan in life, but lots of things we don't plan. It's worth just thinking about what we plan and what we don't. For instance many people plan their provision for old age, they plan their monthly income and expenditure, and they plan to save for holidays or Christmas. But when have you ever heard anyone sit down in the morning and plan to breathe during the coming day, or hearing of an unborn child planning to be born on a particular day – although wouldn't that be lovely for prospective parents if they could get in on such a plan. It seems that money is something that we will plan for but when it comes to receiving – breath or life – we receive those gifts graciously, but unknowingly. We know too that lack of financial planning is disastrous and when financial plans are undermined, for instance through pension mis-selling, or negative equity.

So planning and strategy then have to be made material and real. We all know the sort of dreamer who comes up with great plans but when asked how this will happen, finds that there is nothing to back up the idea. Likewise there are those people who are so ready to count every penny of a project that they have no space for the vision or strategy. There is nothing more disheartening than a visionary idea deflated by meanness. Meanness is disheartening because it contrasts so strongly with the generosity of God. God cannot help being generous, overflowing and lavish; these gracious, gospel words make planning rather more real and tangible. After all, God's plans to love us back were made absolutely real and material in Jesus Christ.

So the planning bit of our headline starts to make sense when we can acknowledge God's generosity in our lives: when we let God do that we let him move on to open up our generosity. God has freely and generously given us our lives, our breath; he provides for the earth in abundance, if we could but be equally generous. The cost, the payment comes in the manner in which we worship God, in the way in which we are disciples of Christ, in the way in which we are open to God's transforming Holy Spirit, 'the Lord and Giver of Life.' (*Nicene Creed*)

Do you feel a sting in the tail making its way into view? Do you feel that there must be a huge 'but' lurking around the corner? We have all met the person who grudgingly goes along with something and then says through pursed lips, 'but how much is all this going to cost?' Well, I am not here to be like the builder giving an estimate, shaking my head and sucking in my breath. I am here to say that what Jesus demands is that we see generosity in a whole new way. Generosity is not like paying a bill; generosity is not the grudging underwriting of a madcap scheme. Generosity for a disciple of Jesus Christ is about knowing that so great and precious a gift has been received that nothing can be counted more highly than that gift. Generosity is only possible from people who have received something. Because all life is a sheer gift from God, something none of us has asked for but something all of us has been given. So how do we swallow Jesus' words about giving up all our possessions about hating our closest relatives? If we are people who have received from God then we are people who give out our love and generosity as disciples of Jesus in a whole new way. If we are going to be generous we can't be clingy. Not clinging to possessions and people is not to reject them but is to be generous in response to them. Jesus' words to give up possessions and relatives is more about taking on new brothers and sisters, father and mothers in Christ, it is about possessing that which comes from God and not what appeals to our own vanity. The only thing Jesus permits us to cling to is his cross, not our cash or our cousins.

It was precisely this that those first Christians described, again by Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, lived out: 'All who believed had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.' (*Acts 2.45*) That was their practical response, because they knew how great the gift was that they had received. But it goes on, 'Day by day, as they spent much time in the temple they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts (*Acts 2.46*). That was part of their receiving, as it is part of ours. Perhaps our first family step to being more generous is by being more thankful: saying grace before a meal is one step in that direction, before we ever get to planned giving and *Gift Aid*. And look what happened to that generous community, they had 'the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.' That generous community of people who understood themselves to be brothers and sisters and relatives in the Body of Christ was rewarded generously. Had you talked dryly about planning and paying to them; it may well have switched them off too.

Over the next four weeks we will explore further in different ways through St Luke's gospel to see what the spark was that set those first Christians on fire with generosity and what sets us on fire with generosity too. Our attitudes may be shaken and challenged both as individuals and as a church family, brothers and sisters in Christ. At the heart of this whole business of Christian generosity and giving is understanding that what we are about today is nothing less than bringing in God's kingdom.

Our church today as much as anywhere needs to plan and needs to pay; pay the bills, pay the Parish Share, pay for what we want to accomplish under God. The most wonderful missionary sight for a world that usually thinks in rather mean spirited terms is to see a generous Church worshipping a generous God, being good stewards of all we have been given.

'Planning and paying', a dull headline but opened up in the context of Christian generosity and discipleship it takes on a whole new meaning. We have a chance of getting our giving right when we get our discipleship right when together we plan and have visions, when we give up and hand over everything to Christ

Sermon notes

Making a headline for a gospel passage is a cheap stunt really! As we know headlines do not make the whole story. Perhaps though we need to think about the phrases and catch lines we use. Are we really conveying what needs saying in our preaching and teaching?

Do you hate talking about money in general? Do you hate talking about it in church? Why?

How can planning be made 'sexy'? Of course that is not entirely what we are after, but in a world where many working people are familiar with planning, strategies, goals and targets we might just think about how that is reflected in our own ministry and church life. Jesus uses concrete examples. What concrete examples can we draw from our ministry and church life? What examples can we draw from our own discipleship and knowledge of the trust God shows in us? So what we are after is not 'sexiness' but attractiveness and a generous spirit in church life, discipleship and giving.

Additional All Age Idea

Have a tower building competition – small groups each with lots of newspaper seeking to build the tallest freestanding tower from the paper. Or similarly this can be done with plastic stacking cups. (This could also be 2 or more all age groups out the front competing with each other.)

Small Group Questions

Icebreaker

Encourage everyone to think of plans that have gone spectacularly wrong and here the stories OR if you didn't play the game on Sunday why not play the tower building game in the small group?

Questions

1. What have you given up to become a disciple of Jesus Christ?
2. What does our church need to give up to become more effective in its discipleship?
3. What does generosity look like to you? Can you share a story of generosity from home or abroad that inspires or challenges you?
4. How do we bring together our sense of discipleship and the whole business of planning and paying for the corporate life of our church?
5. How might payment of the church electricity bill be part of Christian discipleship?
6. Look again at Luke 14.25-33: what headline would you give it?

September 16

Luke Chapter 15. vs. 1 – 10:- The Lost sheep and Lost coin

Thought for the day.

What is the Kingdom of God Like?

Reflections on the Reading

There isn't one of us who hasn't lost something at some time or other, and most of us will know the anxiety, frustration and deep disappointment of losing something precious, even something vital to our lives. We will also know the relief and joy that is felt when that which was lost is found. We may know too the long process of coming to terms with a loss that will never be replaced. Jesus as with so many of his parables and stories uses subject matter to which we can all relate. He helps us get a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like; and what, very importantly, God is like.

The two stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin share the same punch lines, the joy that is felt in heaven when a sinner repents. These are but brief glimpses into heavenly places, but there in heaven it seems sinners who repent are received with great celebrations. That is good news indeed for all of us. It certainly is for me, heaven from the looks of it is somewhere where I want to be. I want to be in on the party. At the time of Jesus people believed that God's creation was in two halves, earth and heaven. These two halves were supposed to fit together and be in harmony with each other. If you discovered what was going on in heaven, then you would know what things were supposed to be like on earth too. But it was precisely Jesus' inclination to mix with tax collectors and sinners that had landed him in trouble with the establishment. It was in response to the criticism he received that he told these parables. For his critics, the scribes and Pharisees, the closest you could get to heaven was the Temple. Temple worship required very high levels of purity from the priests, and purity meant keeping a host of laws many of which precluded the observer from having anything to do with common folk, and especially with tax collectors. (*1)

What about God? God of course is the shepherd in the first story. Shepherds were numbered among the unclean and sinners, for they could not observe all the strict washing laws that were part of the "pure life," so venerated by the Pharisees. To the Pharisees shepherds were "people of the land" and there was a complete barrier between them. A Pharisee was forbidden to fraternise socially with such common people; indeed they were supposed to have no business dealings with men of the land either. Aside from that the life of a shepherd was a lonely one and could be dangerous. The sheep grazed on the bleak rocky central plateau lands. Predators were always a threat and could be four legged or two. The sheep grazed free range and could easily stray down rocky gullies or ravines. The shepherd would have to be constantly vigilant. The sheep were kept for their wool and so unlike our sheep today lived relatively long lives. The shepherd knew them all intimately and the bond between him and his flocks was strong. Shepherds often looked after the communal flocks of the village. A shepherd did not drive his sheep to pasture but led them, and they followed. If a shepherd lost a sheep he would be expected to search for it and if it were killed had to bring its fleece back as proof of its demise. (*2)

The shepherd in this parable, according to Brian Morris, former stewardship director of Gloucester Diocese, was a somewhat reckless fellow who was prepared to leave the ninety nine for the sake of the one who went astray. (*3) And so we have this picture of God. God loves

us all. He loves the Pharisee, good and pure, and the man of the land, an ordinary sinner, and indeed even the extraordinary sinner. God is concerned for us all and when we go astray actively seeks us out, even to the extent of being reckless in doing so, if we are to follow Brian Morris's argument. Should we repent he rejoices greatly. Paul saw himself as an extraordinary sinner, a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence who was sought out by God. (*4) God it could be argued was reckless in that when Paul was taken in by Ananias and ministered to, Christians could have been at risk. Certainly Ananias was concerned about Paul and the safety of his fellow Christians. (*5)

Sheep and shepherds are very common metaphors in both the Old and New Testament. Coins are less common. In this second story the Palestinian woman was, it is suggested, poor. Peasant's houses were dark. Windows were few. The floor was beaten earth, probably covered in dried reeds or rushes, or dried grass. The coin would have been small and not easy to find. She lights a lamp and sweeps eager to find the coin. It may have been a matter of necessity. The coin was needed to buy food. It may have been a more sentimental reason. Palestinian women linked ten silver coins together on a chain and stitched them to their headdress. They were rather like a wedding ring, symbolic of marriage. (*6) She was very anxious to have the full set back, and when she finds the missing coin she is overjoyed and calls together her friends and neighbours to rejoice with her. God is like this woman, says Jesus, over a repentant sinner.

Reflections on Luke 15.1 – 10 and Stewardship

For many people Amazing Grace is considered a particularly poignant hymn in that it expresses the great gratitude of an undoubted sinner, for being found when he was lost. John Newton the repentant slave trader was following in the footsteps of St. Paul as were St. Augustine, and St Francis, to name but a three of the many who have repented their former lives and accepted God's grace. When these sinners repented they decided to change their lives and change them dramatically. They severed their allegiances to their old ways and accepted a new ruler, and it was this new ruler who was to turn their lives upside down.

When we the lost sheep and the lost coins in Jesus' parables repent and become followers of Jesus, we in effect come under a new ruler. No longer are we in allegiance to the world and its values, we have a completely new mind set as it were.

One wonders how modern man in our culture would act being confronted with loss such as experienced by the shepherd and the poor woman. The words compensation and claim immediately spring to mind. As Christians we are no longer the self-centred, self-serving go getters of the modern age, ready to wring all we can out of life and the world for our own satisfaction. We are no longer the "get all you can, can all you get, and sit on the can," (*7) brigade, instead we become stewards of God's gifts to us, concerned to do the best for him. The Kingdom of heaven, it is very clear from scripture, is seen as a place and time beyond the grave. The time stretches for eternity. (* 8) There is however another dimension to the Kingdom of God, the here and now, the Kingdom of God within our hearts, within our churches and within our communities. (*9) What does it mean to be a steward building that kingdom ? Rick Warren author of the Purpose driven Life and the Purpose driven Church looking at the nature of Christian Communities argues that as Christians investing in our churches and communities we are not only investing in God's Kingdom here on earth but also for eternity. (*10) In order to make our Churches effective as the Kingdom of God on earth we have to understand what stewardship is all about and make it purposeful. We have to look at our time, our abilities, our possessions and our money, indeed our whole lives and put them at the behest of God. (*11)

Harvest time is a time of rejoicing. Henri Nouwen in talking on Fundraising and Spirituality asserts that as Christians we have a vision that is so exciting that we need to give others the opportunity to participate in that vision. By doing so, he argues, they won't become poorer, but they will become richer by giving. (*12) At harvest time the farmer gathers in what he has grown. What he has grown will certainly depend in large part on what he has sown. St. Paul teaches us "He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully." Paul tells us "God loves a cheerful giver." (*13) We as the sheep that have been found, as the coin that has been returned to its rightful place, need in our gratitude to give back to God. We as the hands of Jesus here on earth, building his Kingdom both in our hearts, and here and now in our families and our communities, we need to sow well that we may harvest greatly, and then we can rejoice gratefully, for we will be richer for so doing.

God the good shepherd out of his great love for us gave us his son to die on the cross. God the good shepherd and seeking woman has searched us out and brought us here to respond to his love, and in our love for him to grow his Kingdom in this place.

- *1 Luke for everyone Tom Wright p 184
- *2 Luke William Barclay p 206 – 207
- *3 Stewardship for Sundays Chichester Diocese Web site Sunday Sermon ideas from the lectionary <http://natstew.diochi.org.uk/>
- *4 1 Timothy 1.12 – 17
- *5 Acts 9.13 - 15
- *6 Luke William Barclay p 209
- *7 Harvest Thanksgiving Stewardship for Sundays Chichester Diocese Web site <http://natstew.diochi.org.uk/>
- *8 John 14.1 –4 & John 3.16
- *9 Ephesians 2.19 – 22
- *10 A purpose driven plan Rick Warren Stewardship for Sundays Chichester Diocese Web site <http://natstew.diochi.org.uk/>
- *11 The Diocese of Winchester Christian Stewardship. What is Christian Stewardship? <http://.winchester.anglican.org./cswhatis.htm>
- *12 Spirituality of Fundraising A conversation with Henri Nouwen Stewardship for Sundays Chichester Diocese Web site <http://natstew.diochi.org.uk/>
- *13 2 Corinthians 9.5 - 8

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 Luke's Gospel for Africa Today Dain, Van Diepen
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 The Diocese of Chichester website <http://natstew.diochi.org.uk/>
 The Diocese of Liverpool website <http://www.givingingrace.org/preaching/preaching.html>
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 The New Oxford Annotated Bible New Revised Standard Version

All Age Talk

What is the Kingdom of God Like?

Preacher/narrator Prays:- Introductory Prayer

As part of our sermon this morning we are going to act out a little play and everybody will have a part. The setting is the family home; the time is Sunday morning, after Church and before lunch. The service that morning was Harvest Festival. Let me introduce the characters. First we have the family, Dad, Mum, Harry and Henrietta the children. *(Names optional.)* Next we have the interrogators, What and What, and then we have the thinkers, and that is you lot. *(Indicates the congregation.)* Now from time to time during the play the interrogators will hold up a notice. The thinkers will read this out loudly and with appropriate expression. And thinkers you are the lucky ones for you are the only ones to have a rehearsal.

Two suitable children, **What and What** hold up the question for all to read. *(In churches with power point facilities and screens the children could display the question on the screen.)*

Everyone reads out :- What is the Kingdom of heaven like?

Preacher/narrator :- Great, thank you, you have just announced the title of the play. Oh and last of all we have the tramp, well I suppose we do. So now we are all clear as to our parts, let's begin.

Henrietta :- *(Helping her father lay the table for Sunday lunch. Mime.)* Who was that funny old man at the back of the Church today?

Harry :- *(Interrupting.)* A tramp silly.

Henrietta :- A tramp what's a tramp doing in Church Dad?

Harry :- He was there last night Dad, I bet he slept there. He slept there didn't he Dad?

Dad :- *(Shrugs.)* Perhaps he wanted to be part of Harvest Festival. Perhaps he came to worship.

Henrietta :- Huh, he smelt, and anyway he couldn't follow any of the hymns. Victoria kept finding him the place but he was totally lost.

Mum :- *(Coming in from the kitchen with a dish and putting it on the table.)* Tramps are generally pretty lost souls Love, and you know we all smell. We all smell of something.

Henrietta :- He smelt awful!

What and What :- *(Hold up placard and lead everyone with the Preacher in reading it out.)*

Everyone :- What is the Kingdom of heaven like?

Harry :- Dad what happened to the Tramp after the service?

Dad :- I really don't know, I suspect he's still in Church. I think the Rev. Philip asked him to help sort out the harvest gifts.

Harry :- Why don't we ask him to lunch.? I'm sure there would be enough. I'll only eat a little and Mum always makes masses, Mum?

Henrietta :- What, no way, what about Aunty Pauline and Uncle Pat, what are they going to think?

What and What :- *(Hold up placard and lead everyone with Preacher in reading it out.)*

Everyone :- What is the Kingdom of heaven like?

Mum :- Well you know what your Uncle Pat is like, he's got a big appetite, but if the rest of us don't expect seconds then I'm sure we'd cope.

Harry :- Dad, Dad, can you help me go onto Ebay?

Dad :- Certainly, but why?

Harry :- That poor tramp's trainers were in a terrible state. If I sell my game consol then I could get him another pair.

Henrietta :- What, you can't do that, That was a present from Aunty Pauline and Uncle Pat, and you said it was your best Christmas gift!

What and What :- *(Hold up placard and lead everyone with Preacher in reading it out.)*

Everyone :- What is the Kingdom of heaven like?

Preacher :- Well, and what is the Kingdom of Heaven like I wonder? *(The cast return to their places.)* In our reading this morning we heard those two wonderful stories that Jesus told about lost and found. What does finding the lost mean in the Kingdom of Heaven? What happened in the Kingdom when the lost sheep was found and the coin recovered? In the Kingdom of heaven, we are told, there was great rejoicing, it was party time, big time.

Every now and again in the Bible we get these glimpses into the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus clearly thought about the Kingdom in a number of ways. In John Chapter 14 he tells his disciples, "In my father's house there are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you." Here the Kingdom is a place where the disciples will be rewarded after earthly life is over. Jesus tells the ruler who is anxious to have eternal life, to sell all he has and give the money to the poor so that he may have treasure in heaven. Luke 18. 18 – 25. But Jesus clearly also thought of the Kingdom of God as existing here on earth. In John 14 the message to his disciples is "If you love me you will keep my commandments." Jesus is speaking about the Kingdom in terms of a relationship, a relationship in which we are in complete harmony with him and ultimately with God, a relationship of love. The Kingdom of heaven exists in our hearts when we live this loving relationship with him. Then thirdly, there is the Kingdom of God that exists within our families and our communities. For Jesus there is a definite social dimension to the Kingdom. Throughout his teaching and preaching, and indeed his ministry, Jesus is at pains to stand up for the poor and the disadvantaged, the sick, the widow, the harlot and those who fell among thieves. In the Sermon on the Mount he challenges us very practically. If you have two coats give one away to him who has none. In Luke 12 Jesus tells his followers to sell their possessions and to give alms for in so doing they will lay up treasure in Heaven. For, says Jesus where your treasure is there your heart will be also. And so we are challenged in our Christian communities, our families, our Bible study groups, house groups, and cell groups and

in our churches to build the Kingdom of God. We are challenged to build that Kingdom within ourselves. We are challenged to build that Kingdom within our communities, and if we do both these things we will be investing in the Kingdom of God in the hereafter, the Kingdom of the Heavenly Hosts praising God for eternity.

Let us think for a moment about the Kingdom of God here on earth and the Church Community. For the Church community living in the Kingdom means fulfilling certain clear functions. We are here to worship God. We are charged too as a Church to give the Gospel message to others, to spread the Good News. We as a Church need to grow in fellowship; we need as a community to grow in our loving relationships with each other. We need to grow as a church in our discipleship, in our spiritual lives, our knowledge of the scriptures and our spirituality, and lastly we as a Church need to reach out to the disadvantaged and the poor, to be the leaven in the community for good.

Clearly in order to do all this our Church community must be resourced. Throughout its history the people of God have recognised this and have made provision for it. Harry was so right in volunteering to sell his best toy in order to buy the tramp new trainers. We as Christians are stewards of God's gifts to us. In acknowledgement of this and in gratitude to God for all he has done for us we are encouraged at Harvest time to bring our first fruits to him, to bring the best of what we have as a grateful, worshipful offering. We read in Proverbs 3 vs. 9 "Honour the Lord with the first fruits of all your produce."

Then there is the ancient, traditional system of tithing. In order for a Christian Community like a Church to function well it is helpful to know what resources it can call upon. Pledging a percentage of our income, be it ten percent, five percent or two and a half percent allows the church to budget properly in its business of building the Kingdom. Giving in grace must not be confused with appeals for money to meet a particular challenge, to help the church get over a particular problem. Giving in grace is not a begging appeal to restore the Church roof; it is part of the way we worship.

It needs to be regular, planned and proportionate.

Of course as stewards of God's creation building the kingdom by bringing our best to him in worship we are not just concerned with money. We look at our time, our talents and our resources and decide how we can use them best in God's service. Mum, in our play, is clearly in complete empathy with her son in wanting to maintain an open house, to welcome the stranger, to share the fruits of her talents.

This was probably not easy. No doubt like all good cooks Mum had calculated in her mind just what she needed in order to feed her family and her guests. Now she was being challenged to provide for an extra person, and what's more for a person she would have known very little about. She does not hesitate; she is prepared to walk the extra mile despite the difficulties. There needs to be an element of sacrifice in our giving for it to be meaningful. We are encouraged by St. Paul to be generous. "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9 vs. 7)

And so at this time of Harvest let us take the opportunity, to reflect in deep gratitude on God's grace and the fact, that God the good shepherd seeks us out, anxious to bring us to be with him in his Kingdom. Let us reflect on our place in that Kingdom of God, and let us take the opportunity to review how we seek to build his Kingdom here on earth and invest in his Kingdom in eternity. Above all in our reflection let us be grateful, joyful and generous. Amen

Additional Ideas for All Age Service

Have a game of seeking & finding with either pictures/models of sheep or pictures / real coins hidden around the church building. Anyone can join in!

Small Group Questions

Icebreaker

Encourage everyone to think of a time when they had lost something important – how did they feel about the loss? When it was re-found what did they do to express their joy?

Questions

- 1) 'Amazing Grace' is considered a particularly poignant hymn for many in that it expresses the great gratitude of an undoubted sinner, the slave trader John Newton, for being found when he was lost. How do we feel about our faith and for being as it were found? How can we express our gratitude to God?
- 2) What do we learn about God's character and actions from the 2 parables in Luke 15.1-10?
- 3) How do we respond to God' saving activity in the lives of others? Can we be mean and grudging like the Pharisees were on occasions?
- 4) Henri Nouwen says "you won't become poorer, you'll become richer by giving". What does he mean by this? In what ways is it seen to be true?
- 5) What does it mean to live worshipful lives?
- 6) The drama "What is the Kingdom of Heaven like?" does not have a satisfactory ending. How would the story line go if we were writing the ending?
- 7) What does it mean to be regular, planning and proportionate in our Christian stewardship? How can we embrace making the regular, planned and proportionate contributions of our stewardship as a family work, so that each of us from the oldest to the youngest makes their contribution, a contribution that involves an element of sacrifice?

September 23

Luke Chapter 16.1-13:- The Shrewd Manager or Farsighted Wisdom?"

Sermon

This story of a clever crime is exactly the stuff that would get a bold headline in one of today's tabloid newspapers. "*Cool and Clever embezzlement!!*" might be how one red top puts it. But as Jesus tells the parable, which has been described by one commentator as the most difficult parable in Luke's Gospel, it is not simply one of a crime, but a story with a most significant sting in its tale.

So what of the parable? Jesus, who is teaching his disciples, v1, tells of a dishonest manager who was wasting his master's possessions. The Master is rich and, unsurprisingly, he does not like what he has heard; the manager has been wasting his possessions. It's interesting to note that the word 'wasted' used in v1 is the same word that was used of the Prodigal Son back in Ch. 15.13 who wasted or squandered his Father's possessions. And so the rich man, understandably, calls in his manager, v2.

"What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer."

'I want to see the books', says the rich man! 'News has come to me that you have squandered my money, you have been careless collecting in the rent of the various properties I own, you have squandered my assets. You need to give an account.'

This sends the manager into despair, v3.

"The manager said to himself, "What shall I do now? My Master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg..."

'Help', says the Manager! 'What am I going to do? I am going to have to look for alternative employment, I will need another job! But I've got no qualifications, what am I going to do? I'm facing a crisis.'

But the manager sees a way out, v4.

"I know what I'll do so that when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses"

The manager, of his own initiative, calls a meeting of his master's debtors and the conversation goes something like this...

'Look times are tough, its difficult to make ends meet, and we only made verbal agreements, I did not bother writing anything down so let's sort out our business. How much do you owe? Well how about we reduce it by 50%? How about you? OK then, well pay 75% and let's call it quits. I hope you are pleased with that? Maybe one day you will realise you owe me one. It's all written down now.'

And so in time, v8, the Master, having heard what happened, commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, v8.

The Master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

The Master realised he had been cheated, but he commends his manager for his initiative, his shrewdness, in the way he had dealt with the debtors. He does not commend him for his dishonesty, but his shrewdness. And why? v8b

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light. I tell you use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

What does the parable mean? Well our first point

1. Live Shrewdly in the Creator's world v 1 – 9

Now the bible has much to say about living shrewdly and wisely in God's world. It has got lots of practical, pragmatic advice on how to live in the world. Now this is mainly found in the wisdom literature, an example of this might be something like Proverbs 24.27

"Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that build your house"

Go and make sure you have planted your field, then go and make your house; common sense advice. Or something else like the hardworking farmer gets the harvest, and under normal conditions its true. Work hard and you will get the reward. Now, of course, there are exceptions to the rule, the farmer whose crop is wiped out by the freak weather episode, or the lazy farmer who does little work and just strikes lucky with a bumper crop, but under normal conditions work hard and the results will come. And that is good general biblical advice for living in the created order that God has made.

What Jesus is saying in our parable is that this is the way the world works; this is how the people of the world deal with each other. Therefore as you are part of a created order, you need to ensure you also are acting in a shrewd and wise way. Therefore under the sovereignty of God, using all biblical wisdom available, you must work sensibly and shrewdly.

And so what Jesus goes onto say is that when you organise your church finances, or for the CYFA group you run, or the children's group or, in fact, your own individual finances, use your common sense and be as practical and as pragmatic as the world is. Be wise, be shrewd. You are part of a created order, you are part of the world, therefore live shrewdly as part of that world.

Like the athlete who shrewdly watches what they eat, and trains hard following a training programme. Their shrewdness and practical discipline is what gets them results. Or the musician who practices his instrument for a couple of hours each day, and goes to their lessons, their shrewdness and practical discipline is what gets them results. It's nothing new, its just pragmatic discipline.

Because we live in the created order, Jesus says we need to live shrewdly. Have a look at v 8 again.

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light.

Jesus says the people of this world are more shrewd than the people of light, therefore we need to live shrewdly.

So take for example the issue of who is chosen as the Church treasurer. Obviously the most important criteria is that they are godly, like any leadership position within the church, they

need to be godly. But after that who do we chose? Now many churches chose an accountant or a solicitor; a safe pair of hands no doubt. But isn't an accountant's job to balance the books? Surely if we want to use God's money in the best way possible, (of course with a responsible mindset under girding all our endeavours) we want a business man or woman, an entrepreneur, stewarding the resources God has given to his church? Shrewdly and practically stewarding the money God has given the church. Is there something to learn from the way the world operates? Jesus says there is.

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light.

We are living in the Creator's world and there are various creation principles that apply to everybody. We need to work those out shrewdly. For our churches, our groups, and, of course, our own life.

2. Live wholeheartedly under the Heavenly King v 13

Jesus now goes on to teach what the first loyalty of all his followers must be, v13.

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Jesus says on the one hand we are living in the created world and are therefore part of the created order. But if we are Christians, if we have come to know and love the Lord Jesus then that will make a huge difference. Pragmatic yes, we do live in the world but also principled. We seek to live under the Heavenly King.

You cannot serve both God and money.

The first part of the passage, the parable has said to us there is no need to be embarrassed about money, or banks or investments or using our finances wisely. However we stand in immortal danger, for money as well as being a great tool can also be a great trap, and it can be the one we start to serve, instead of the God who has given it to us. Money can be wonderfully used and we are all to possess it, but we are not to be possessed by it.

I suppose in this way money is a bit like sex. Sex is a wonderful gift from God, to be used within the right boundaries of a loving, heterosexual, monogamous lifelong relationship. Marriage. However we will all know of the hurt and pain of the misuse and abuse of sex, when it has not been used in the right context.

So it is with money. Money can be wonderfully used and we are all to possess it, but we are not to be possessed by it.

So with the pragmatism of verses 1 – 9 we now have coupled the principle of v13.

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Followers of Jesus need to live pragmatically but they are also to live wholeheartedly under the Heavenly King, and that means he alone needs our full allegiance. The pragmatism and the money cannot be the thing that controls us. The standard of our Heavenly God as laid out in v13 is what needs to be our guiding principle. Total allegiance.

Now the language of v13 might pass us by, but what is interesting is that servant is actually better understood as slave. And the distinctive aspect of a slave is that they are owned by their master. Slaves are not just underprivileged people, they are owned by somebody. And no-one can be owned by two masters! There is no 'time share' on slaves!

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

It's not a question of both/and but either/or. You cannot serve both God and money. And so the question I ask myself is "Who owns me?" We are all owned by someone, and we shall all be mastered by someone or something. It could be sex, or power, or popularity or political ideology. The question is "Who owns me?" One of the definitions of a Christian is that they are 'owned' by the Lord God. But you cannot be owned by the Lord God and Money; that says Jesus does not work.

If you have ever tried to get into a canoe or kayak you will know that it is a very dangerous place to be with one foot in the canoe and with one foot on the bank. You are safe if you are either in the canoe or on the bank, but with a foot in each camp it only leads to a wet and painful display of the splits.

And so it is with God. *You cannot serve both God and money.* It must be one or the other

So as we finish to summarise. Firstly we are all part of the created order. So we have to deal with money, and in the right place it's a good thing. So we all have money, the question is:

- Am I as wise and sensible as the people around me with my money?
- Have I got the shrewdness that is commended, personally and as a church?
- Am I using it in the best way possible for the Gospel?"

But secondly we are also citizens of the kingdom. We have been bought with a price, the death of the Lord Jesus, and I now belong to him.

- And so am I living under his Lordship?
- Am I just trying to serve myself, or am I seeking to serve him and see his kingdom extended?
- Am I passionate for his glory or just my own?

The question to ask as we close, Who owns you? If the Lord owns you, then he owns your money as well, and the way you use it will reflect that. However if your money owns you, and not the Lord, then that will be seen very clearly too.

Additional All Age Idea

This parable could very readily be acted out by a small group (Parts would be Rich Man, Manager / Steward, 2 debtors – though you could happily create more and the items concerned could be modernised from those in the parable).

The drama could be stopped at different points e.g. After first conversation between Rich Man & Steward; after the first transaction; again after the 2nd transaction; then before the rich man responds to the manager's actions, and again after his response. At each break ask the congregation to comment on the action / feelings etc. Then sum up at the end with brief pointers to what Jesus was communicating. This whole would be the sermon!

Small Group Questions

Icebreaker

Has anyone in the group experienced dishonest practice in the work place? How does it make you feel?

Questions

1. How do you react to the parable of the dishonest manager?
2. What point was Jesus trying to make through this parable?
3. What is faithful use of our wealth?
4. Why can't we serve 2 masters?
5. In all honesty how do we find money (Mammon) sometimes controlling us both as individuals and as a church?
6. What response might we make to this passage of scripture now?

September 30

Luke Chapter 16. vs.19 – 31:- The Rich Man and Lazarus

Sermon

(not verbatim with accompanying notes)

Some background reading

- Notes on the Parables by Archbishop Trench – brilliant.
- The message of Luke by Michael Wilcock – helpful
- DBS Luke by William Barclay – interesting

"The reason for the telling of this parable stems from Ch 15.1-2 the Pharisees were *muttering* about Jesus' associating with the underclass, Christ then justifies himself. In Ch16.1-13 He applies the principle in discussion with his disciples. The Pharisees overhear Him, v14 they were *sneering* at Jesus, then follows the passage that is for our consideration, it is intended to be a searching application of all the preceding section to the callous Pharisees in their indifference to the poor. Therefore we must be careful to remember the primary reason for Christ's telling of this parable, not so much to teach details about the future life, but to drive home the awful danger of making the wrong use of this life, particularly in the realm of giving.

Wealth. The rich man ('Dives' comes from the Latin word for rich). We are not told that he gained his wealth by underhand practices, e.g. avoiding paying Income Tax though he clearly broke the 4th Commandment as he did not rest on the 7th day nor labour on the other six days!! The problem raised here is not that he was wealthy, but his attitude to those who were around him.

All of us are surrounded by comforts and luxuries, none of us can be classed as poor. As Robert Burns said nothing "petrifies the feelings" as much as selfishness.

Poverty. The beggar is named as Lazarus, the only one named in any parable; the name means "God is my help". (Note - there is no connection to Mary & Martha's brother Lazarus whom Jesus raises from the dead in John 11). Christ never denounced riches, rather He recognised the fact of private ownership, and also taught the principal of stewardship. As Christians we are not owners but stewards, responsible to God for what we do with His gifts put in our charge.

One essential element in stewardship is the personal interest in those to whom we give. "Not what we give, but what we share, for the gift without the giver is bare"
Christianity does not preach the saintliness of poverty, but the special peril of wickedness in wealth. Note the 'deceitfulness of wealth', Matt 13.22. There can also be deceitfulness in poverty ie the fancied inability to give or share.

NB John Wesley's three rules for the use of money.

- a. "Get all you can" there is duty to proper acquisition justified by Scripture and human experience.
- b. "Save all you can" Vital safeguard against waste.
- c. "Give all you can" A safeguard against selfishness and also against getting and saving in the wrong way

(The preacher here might like to think about some advice to the rich in the congregation, that is everybody up side of the gate, notes on 1 Tim 6.17-19 might be helpful on the Questions to home groups page)

(Again the preacher might like to look at the other side of the gate this could paint an important picture, for Barclay calls Dives 'the man who did not notice')

William Barclay writes "Lazarus was waiting for the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. In that time there were no knives, forks or napkins. Food was eaten with the hands, in very wealthy houses the hands were cleansed by wiping them on hunks of bread, which were then thrown away. That was what Lazarus was waiting for." This could be a frightening picture of how many Christians give. ie God gets the 'fag end' or 'what's left over' when we have spent our money on other things.

(Here in the sermon one could run through the 8 ways of giving to be found in the Questions for home groups depending on the local situation. I would be inclined to use 5 and 7 as follows) (It is a fearful thing to think that paying to guess the weight of cake can be confused with Christian giving !!)

To get over the 'fag end' giving pattern we need to turn our giving on its head; i.e. God should come first. The question is how much, not so much as how much can I afford, but rather what are God's dues? A percentage here is helpful in this 10 percent or at least 5 percent. I recommend the 10 percent, easy on the calculations and more importantly a standard for giving in the Bible. Malachi 3.10 "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse test me in this says the Almighty and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room for it". A lovely promise but it is of course conditional.

One practical matter; pay by direct debit, then you never have to handle it. As a clergyman on £1000 a month slipping £25 into the collection each Sunday might be difficult if towards the end of the month things were getting a bit low. So fix the amount between you and the Lord, and give direct from your account and your old human nature cannot get a hold of it.

There is a salmon river in the west of Ireland where the owners of the stretch require those fishing on it to hand in to the owners at the end of the day every other salmon that they caught. It is fascinating to see how small the 'every other salmon' are!!

Our old human nature is the big enemy to our generous giving, how can I cheat, how can I avoid paying what I ought? The last of the myriad of laws and regulations in the Book of Leviticus deals with this very point, Ch 27.32; it is to do with the farmer and the tithe of his herd or flock. He was not allowed to stand back, view his animals and yield to the temptation of giving God the weedy and the lame, in other words the 'fag end'. The verse says, "The entire tithe of the herd and flock, every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod will be holy to the Lord. He must not pick out the good from the bad or make any substitution." (Somewhere down the line it should be important to mention Gift aiding, the Government is usually seen to be the largest single contributor to church funds when the annual accounts are referred to at the Church Annual Meeting) (Also the use of weekly envelopes which helps thoughtful regular giving)

Our giving should not only be systematic but also cheerful. Note 2 Cor 9.7 "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver". The Greek word for cheerful here is *hilarus* from which we get the word hilarious. I think that there should be an air of hilarity in our Christian giving, not careless but with an air of abandonment, yes even bordering on the heroic. For no one is ever a loser when giving to the Lord's work.

John Bunyan writes seeing in a vision; "There was a man who had a roll of cloth and as he was unrolling lengths off it and giving it to the poor, so it grew, at which he adds 'there was a man and some did count him mad the more he gave away the more he had' "

Here is the gate beyond which the beggar sits.

NB It is only a gate; note the slenderness of the separation in this life and the impassable gulf in the next.

Poverty is no longer a result of natural scarcity, poverty is a problem because humankind allows a world of inequality to exist. This is a world where wealth is divided unequally (the combined wealth of the world's 225 richest people is the same as the annual income of the poorer half of the world population) and where war and conflict are rife. This is a world where we fail to care for our environment and, by our failure, jeopardise the livelihoods of those dependent upon the land.

This is a world where we allow:

- 35,000 people to die everyday of hunger
- 40 million people per year die of hunger related diseases. The equivalent of 300 Aeroplane crashes every day. There are no survivors, and half the passengers are children.
- A world where 2 million children under the age of 5 died last year as a result of diarrhoea
- A world where over 1 billion people don't have access to clean water
- A world where more than 2 billion people do not have access to adequate sanitation
- A world where life expectancy is increasing world wide, although in the 16 world's poorest countries it has decreased. (UK 77.5, Sierra Leone 38)
- We live in a world where we allow the fact that 1 in 6 African children will not live to celebrate their 5th birthday.

We live in a world where we say that we can't afford to spend the:

- £4bln to provide education for all
- £6bln to provide water and sanitation for all
- £9bln to ensure basic health and nutrition

and yet we spent

- £7.4bln last year on Ice cream in Europe
- £11.3bln last year on Pet Foods in Europe and the US
- £5bln on the internet last year in the UK in the 10 weeks run up to Christma
- The US government has just announced the cost of the war in Iraq will soon top 1 trillion dollars – the war has so far taken the lives of an estimated 655,000 innocent Iraqis

We live in a broken world where without a voice, the voiceless cannot speak and where without just governance, the poor will continue to be oppressed. Where extortionate interest rates will carry on crippling indebted counties and unjust trade rules will disadvantage the developing world.

HIV/AIDS Facts –

- 40 ml people living with HIV world wide (65% in Africa)
- Every day in 2005 more than 13,000 people were newly infected by HIV
- in 2005 3 million people lost their lives to AIDS.. of which 570,000 were children – in real terms this means every minute a child dies of AIDS
- around 13 ml children have been orphaned by AIDS that's the same as the total number of young people in the UK
- in the hardest hit countries 15% of all children have been orphaned by AIDS
- by 2010 it is expected that the global figure will reach 25ml AIDS orphans
- India is the next big epicentre with Russia following close behind
- It is one of the greatest threats to eradicating poverty – direct threat to child's right to life and a stable family environment – leaves children vulnerable to abuse and exploitation + destroying lives in all sectors of the economy

Additional All Age Ideas

This parable can also be acted out – in essence 3 characters, the Rich Man, Lazarus & Abraham plus some extras as angels and gravediggers.

Lazarus is seen clearly in agony and poverty. The rich man regularly walks past him and takes no notice whatever Lazarus says or does (even within the seriousness there is scope for comic humour here).

Lazarus dies and is carried away to Abraham and welcomed, re-clothed etc. (the rich man hadn't even noticed Lazarus had gone so perhaps he continues walking past where Lazarus had been whilst Lazarus is being welcomed by Abraham.)

The rich man dies. He is buried on the other side of the stage. He 'awakes' in agony. Across the stage he sees Abraham and calls out to him. The conversation as in Luke can be replayed verbatim. Freeze the action.

Ask the congregation to talk about what they have seen with their neighbours. Feedback and as leader comment / summarise.

At a later point in the service use some of the facts and figures about poverty in the earlier notes; use pictures on a screen if possible to illustrate these (perhaps from our link areas of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo & Myanmar – though don't forget the reality of wealth there and poverty here as well). Comment on our use of our wealth and our giving.

Use U2 song 'Crumbs from your table' (on 'How to dismantle an atomic bomb' CD) with visual images for prayerful reflection.

Small Group Questions

Icebreaker

What's the best gift you have ever received – and why is it the best?

Questions

Here are 8 ways of giving.

- 1 **Careless**, giving to anything anytime
- 2 **Impulsive**, giving without proper consideration or inquiry
- 3 **Lazy**, giving by means of bazaars, church suppers etc
- 4 **Self-denying**, by saving on luxuries and using only what is actually necessary
- 5 **Systematic**, one-tenth or one-fifth or some other proportion.
NB Leviticus 27.32-33 God knows all about human nature
Malachi 3.10 The promise is conditional !!
- 6 **Equal** giving to God as much as we spend on ourselves
- 7 **Cheerful**, 2 Corinthians 9.7 The Greek word for cheerful is HILARUS from which we get the word hilarious, note the hilarity in church next Sunday during the collection!!
- 8 **Heroic**, limiting our expenses to certain small sum and giving the rest to God

1 Where does my giving fit in on this scale?

2 Where does our church's giving fit in on this scale?

3 Where should my giving be?

4 Where should our church's giving be?

AND / OR

Instructions to rich people

Please don't kid yourselves, in world terms, we are all rich people.

A preamble for thought or discussion

There is nothing that "petrifies the feelings" (Robert Burns) more than selfishness

Read:- 1 Timothy 6.17-19

1 Do not be arrogant

2 Do not put your hope in money

They say that money talks; the only thing it has said to me is "Good bye".

3 Nothing wrong in enjoying riches, though not selfishly

4 Be rich in good deeds

5 Be generous

6 Be willing to share, communicate

Taking these instructions 1 by 1 how might we follow them today?

Closing thought from John Bunyan

"There was a man, and some did count him mad,
The more he gave away the more he had."

October 7

Luke Chapter 17.5 – 10:- Faith and Duty

Sermon

We are living in a superstar culture. Through the early summer we saw another television series selecting someone to be Joseph for the musical 'Joseph and His Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat'. Thousands apply but only one (Lee Meads) succeeds and that person is rocketed to stardom and recognition. We also saw a prediction that some Premiership footballers could be earning £10m a year very soon.

Whilst all this is going on, the vast majority of us are trying our best to live the life that Jesus calls us to live - to be faithful and to live out our commitments to family, church, friends and work. No-one is about to whisk us away and fast track us to stardom and no doubt we are constantly aware of the pressure we are under and how hard life can be.

The disciples were on a journey with Jesus, learning about their faith, being challenged and being prepared for the time that Jesus would be with them no more. Some of the learning was not easy as we see in today's reading.

The cry of the disciples' hearts

In order to understand what prompted their request to Jesus "Increase our faith!" we need to look back a bit. We see in the previous chapter how Jesus had taught radically about forgiveness in the story of the rich man and his manager, then he told the story of Dives and Lazarus, which finishes with the beggar in paradise and the rich man in Hades. This is topsy-turvy stuff. At the beginning of Ch 17 comes the awesome warning that it would be better to be thrown in the sea with a millstone around our necks than to cause a little one to sin. Remember that the disciples are being trained as teachers of the faith, and here they receive dire warnings about what happens if we cause people to stray. Add to that more challenging teaching about being forgiving in verse 4 and we may begin to understand how the disciples are feeling.

They are recognising that they cannot do this on their own and cry out "Lord, increase our faith". Jesus' response to this is that all they need is faith as small as a mustard seed.

Jesus' response

We live in a "quick fix" culture. TV programmes transform a house or a garden in a day or a week. There are innumerable books and courses available on motivational techniques to improve our lives. We even have energy drinks to give us a boost when we are under pressure – Red Bull "gives you wings".

When the disciples were overwhelmed Jesus did not start a motivational programme of team talks or hand out the Red Bull! His instruction was to take the faith they had, and use it. Even if it is only the size of a mustard seed. In other words he is saying to them "This is not about working up a great faith in yourself. It is about offering what we do have to a great God"

The world we live in drives us to believe so often that it all depends on us and our efforts. It doesn't because as Jesus said in John 5:19 "I can only do what I see the Father doing". God is at work, and with the faith we have we are invited to join in his kingdom work.

So when the disciples needed a boost – it was not Red Bull, a team talk or spin, but faith they were told to reach for.

Where faith and duty meet

However, Jesus did go on to indicate that we have a part to play. The last few verses here seem odd at first reading. Suppose you have a servant out working in the fields or caring for the sheep. When he comes in at the end of the day would you ask him to join you at table? Or would you not say prepare my food and wait on me while I eat?"

These slightly shocking verses make the point that despite all we do we are never in God's debt. The human temptation is to say "I've done this and I've done that, and I've given this and worked so hard – surely God will be satisfied now?" Jesus is reminding the disciples and us that true service to God is done out of gratitude and love for him, and not to win rewards. We are asked to offer all that we have and are, for God to take and use as he pleases.

At Harvest time we remind ourselves of God's generous and gracious provision to us all and we give thanks. With the disciples we must acknowledge that thankfulness is manifested in our faithfulness, saying as the servants do in the final verse of Ch 17 "we have only done our duty".

As we are thinking about our giving in this series these verses can have a bearing on our attitude to our giving to God. The disciples were slightly overwhelmed by the demands discipleship was going to make on them – hence their cry for increased faith.

In the same way as we look at the needs of the world around us and our own call to live lives in the service of the gospel we can be overwhelmed too. There is so much to do and we have so little. We may well make the same cry to God – "Lord – more faith please!"

This passage teaches us that we do not need to be overwhelmed. All we need is faith as small as a mustard seed. Notice here that Jesus is asking them for what they **do** have – a small amount of faith – not for what they **do not** have – huge faith!

The final verses of the passage challenge us to play our part and do our duty. An essential part of that duty as disciples is to release the resources that will allow the church to meet the challenges of today's ministry. So often our work and ministry are restricted by lack of financial resources. The needs of ministry are met when we all join in - The solution lies in each of us learning to trust God and play our part.

We may often feel like the servant coming in from the fields, needing a rest and a meal! We may feel we have done enough but the point here that as servants and disciples of the God who has done so much for us and given us so much, there is no end to our duty of thankfulness and faithfulness. We can never arrive at a point where we have "done enough" for God. We can never outgive him.

It is so encouraging that when the disciples cry out for faith Jesus talks about faith as the smallest of seeds. Here is encouragement that Jesus is not looking for the "superstar" or "quick fix" solutions we thought about at the beginning. He says instead that we all have a part to play, no matter how wobbly our faith feels. Take the faith that you **do** have, and join in.

We all have responsibilities in the Kingdom and we are not to shy away from them. When we all play our part and release our resources, great things can begin to happen in our churches and communities. It is worth remembering that the disciples who professed little faith, who fled at the arrest of Jesus and denied him at his trial, became the powerful group of men and

women who set the world on fire with the good news of the gospel. What can happen here in ?????? if we demonstrate the same faithfulness and obedience to the God who has done so much for each one of us?

Remember Jesus saying that he could only do what he saw the Father doing. What is Jesus doing in our church and community? What are the opportunities he is giving us? How can we join in and help both to support and resource those things? How can we make a difference here for God?

Luke 17:5-10 sermon notes

The context is important here in understanding the disciples' cry that Jesus will show them how to increase their faith. In the light of the gospel's demands they are feeling inadequate, hence my looking back into Chapter 16. Clearly there are times when we as 21st Century disciples also feel inadequate.

I use the "superstar" and Red Bull images to show that Jesus' solutions are very different to the world's answers. The superstar image may also be useful in helping to tease out that the Kingdom grows as we all work together – we are not looking for superstars in the church – but faithfulness. You may find better illustrations for your situations.

Verses 1-4

I pick these up because they seem to set the scene for the disciples' cry in Verse 5

Verse 6

One of the encouragements I have taken from this is that Jesus tells the disciples that the answer lies within them. It is to do with their faith – no matter how small they think it is. Hence my references contrasting this with quick fix House and Garden programmes, where help is drafted in from outside.

God is asking them to work with what they have, not what they do not have. Encouraging for those in our churches who feel they have little or nothing to offer. It is not about working up great faith, but about having faith in a great God.

I refer to John 5:19 in which Jesus says that he can only do what he sees the Father doing. Jesus did not have to "work things up" and neither do we. I refer towards the end of the sermon to the need to recognise what God is doing in our communities and churches. What opportunities are we being given?

Verses 7-10

Quite a tricky passage! Tom Wright sums it up as "Finally, the shocking lesson that all we do, even the hard work we do for God, never for a moment puts God in our debt".

The truth is that our Christian duty to serve God in obedience and faithfulness never comes to an end.

This is, I think, the main link in the passage with Christian Stewardship. Harvest thankfulness ought to overflow in a desire to be more obedient and dutiful. Hence my references that we can be overwhelmed by the needs around us, but that with faith and obedience, which includes releasing the financial resources to enable the church to go about its kingdom business, great things can happen. Lives and community can be changed and the gospel produce fruit. (Also - don't forget the work and testimony of any mission links you have)

Finances are a way that we can all play our part even in a situation in which we may feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. Hopefully we will all be able to draw local examples of successful local projects which have tested faith, but which in the end testify to God's faithfulness.

My closing paragraphs again try to encourage us that we all have a part to play, and that God will honour us as we step out in faith for him.

Additional All Age Idea

Not very original but having lots of **mustard seeds** (you might want to point out it's a different kind of mustard from the one in Jesus' words) and planting them in compost in a small pot / sowing them on dampened tissue paper on a paper plate to take home and see what happens.

For prayers **create a Prayer Tree** with branches at the front of church. Everyone could have a paper mulberry leaf on which to write / draw their prayers and come forward to hang them on the mulberry tree.

Small Group questions

Icebreaker/Introduction

Describe the biggest risk you have ever taken. Tell the group why it was risky and how it worked out.

Questions

1. Why do you think the disciples asked Jesus to "increase our faith"? (Luke 17:5) What had Jesus said to provoke this response?
2. We are surrounded by the "Superstar" culture in sport and entertainment. Alan Sugar even finds business executives that way on his "Apprentice" show. Why is this a bad model for how the church ought to operate?
3. Jesus' response to the disciples was that we only need faith as small as a mustard seed. How does this encourage us? Can you share examples from personal or church life where a tiny amount of faith has seen wonderful results?
4. Verses 7-10 at first reading do seem shocking. How do they help us to understand our duty before God? What do you think are the main points that Jesus is trying to teach here? How do we reconcile our natural human desire for recognition and thanks with our responsibilities as disciples?
5. The disciples appear to have been overwhelmed by the demands of the gospel on their lives. We might find ourselves feeling the same. In what areas do we feel "overwhelmed" or inadequate?
6. In verses 7-10 the message is that the servant has a duty to perform. How do we understand our giving as part of our "duty" as disciples? Why is it so important in terms of the church's mission?

Response

Jesus encouraged the disciples to be faithful even when faith felt small. It might be helpful to sit quietly towards the end of the evening, so that each person can reflect on their own response to this.

- Where do I feel my faith is inadequate?
- What has this study said to me today?
- How is God calling me to respond?
- In what ways could I show greater faith and trust in God?
- Am I doing all that I might to resource God's work?

You may like to close by reading Psalm 84

Leader's Notes:

Icebreaker: The idea is to get folk talking about taking risks and recognising that they have done. Hopefully some of the answers and solutions will be humorous, but also widen our sense of the possible.

1. The main aim here is to help us understand that the disciples felt overwhelmed by the demands of the gospel. They have heard some tough teaching and may doubt their ability to live up to it. They are beginning to recognise the costs of discipleship – which we also need to face as 21st century disciples
2. The main point here is that in the church we are committed to the truth that everyone has a part to play. Cf 1 Corinthians 12 – God is at work in all of us. We may like to watch superstars emerging on television – but we are all God’s superstars! You may tease out the contrast between being observers and audience, and being participants. We are one body, in this together
3. Hopefully here there will be stories of someone stepping out in faith, or of a project getting started because of someone’s vision, despite only a small dose of faith.
4. These are tough verses. The important thing is to remember that Jesus is only illustrating the point that Christian duty knows no end, and that God is no man’s debtor. We cannot ever work hard enough to say that we have satisfied God.

You may like to emphasise that it is not about lack of thankfulness, hence the second part of the question.

The main point is that we have duties and responsibilities in the Kingdom, which God looks to us to fulfil. You could refer to how the church would have looked if the disciples had not been obedient after Jesus’ had left them.

5. This is an opportunity to reflect on our personal lives and/or the life of the church. Where are the real needs in our church and community? Do they overwhelm us? Does our mustard seed faith seem inadequate in the face of them? Try to find examples from church life which are encouraging. Things that have been successfully undertaken.
6. The main point here is that the mission of the church relies on the resources we give as part of our personal stewardship. Without it there would be no local church and no mission.

Some additional sources of information for those using the Autumn Stewardship Sermon Series

- "Lectionary reflections year C" Jane Williams, SPCK 2003, 0-281-05529-7 - Nothing on the Gospel for 9 Sept, then pages 108, 110, 112, 114
- "Twelve months of Sundays Year C" Tom Wright SPCK 2000 0-281-05285-9 - Pages 102, 104, 106, 108, 110
- Stewardship sermon ideas can be found at <http://stewardship.diochi.org.uk/content/10-teaching-worship/07-lectionary-ideas/07-yearC.doc>
You need to scroll down to Proper 18 (about three-quarters of the way down the page) to reach 9th Sept - the others follow sequentially.
- Keith Tondeur (Credit Action) has covered the first four Sundays in his "Street Parables" (Authentic Media, 2004, ISBN 1-86024-514-5) starting on pages 141, 61, 109 and 89. He has also covered the same parables (generally more briefly) in "What Jesus said about money and possessions" (Monarch, 1998, ISBN 1-87424-418-3) on pages 25, 26, 112 and 52.