

Sermon Sunday 8 March 2020
Lenten Deanery Evensong

Exodus 16: 9-18
2 Corinthians 8: 1-15; 9: 6-11
Christians care: 'Rich generosity'

You have probably heard the story of the vicar who stood up one Sunday morning and said 'I have good news – and bad news. The good news is that we have enough money to complete our new church centre. The bad news is that the money is still in your pockets.'

Money is not a popular topic for sermons. It was, however, a popular topic for Jesus: He told 38 parables during his ministry, and 16 of them were about money and possessions. Jesus spoke more about money than about heaven and hell combined.

And Paul in our 2 Corinthians reading is taking the rich Corinthians to task for beginning well but not carrying through. He even holds up the poor Macedonians as good examples of good givers! And better givers than them!

Who were the Macedonians? Macedonia is a region which includes, among other towns, Philippi and Thessalonica – so we're talking about places where there were Gentile churches started by Paul and to whom Paul wrote letters – we have his letter to the Philippians and two letters to the Thessalonians.

You see, the Corinthian Christians had the previous year taken up a collection to help the impoverished Mother church in Jerusalem. But after this one-off contribution – nothing. They had promised to continue supporting the poor in Jerusalem but didn't carry through their promise. And Paul dedicates almost two chapters to persuade them to re-think their strategy and make a regular contribution to the poor. After all, he argues, you have been given so much by our generous God that the least you can do is be generous in turn. The hymn we sang, and the Psalms 65 and 66, outline the generosity of God in nature. And Paul also uses the example of Jesus himself, who in his generosity in v9 though he was rich, yet for your sake became poor.

He even appeals to them in v15 using an argument about equality, in an OT reference to the Israelites in the desert (our OT reading) when God supplied manna to them, which they had to gather each morning – 'those who gathered much did not have too much, and those who gathered little did not have too little.'

At this point I want to tell you briefly about my three conversion experiences. Yes, three. And yes, this is relevant.

When I was 11 I went to a Crusader camp and, at one of the Sunday evening talks I heard, for the first time, all about the cross. Long story short, I became a Christian there and then. Never looked back. Converted. For life.

Then when I was about 13, I was listening to the radio and they started playing the last movement of Beethoven's fifth symphony – you know the one. But when you're 13 it makes a big impact. I've been hooked on classical music ever since that day. Another conversion experience.

And then when I was in my late 20s Susan and I were running a Family Holiday for about 100 people for CPAS. One of the guests, after the evening meeting, started talking about tithing, and how 10% of income was the right amount, as a Biblical principle, to be giving away. Up to then I hadn't given much thought to God's call on my money. But I went home from that Family Holiday determined to give the right amount back to God. We didn't have a great deal of money, but we discovered that, as you give some away, God never lets you down, and somehow you still have enough, and to spare. I was converted to tithing. As I hope you are!

I want to tell you the story of Andrew Carnegie, a Scot who went to the USA to seek his fortune. He was born in Dunfermline in 1835, and when he was 12 the family emigrated to America. Carnegie worked in a

Pittsburgh cotton factory as a boy, before rising to the position of division superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1859. While working for the railways, he invested in various ventures, including iron and oil companies, and made his first fortune by the time he was in his early 30s. In the 1870s, Carnegie co-founded his first steel company, near Pittsburgh. Over the next few decades, he created a steel empire, maximizing profits and minimizing inefficiencies through ownership of factories, raw materials and transportation infrastructure involved in steel making. In 1892, his primary holdings were consolidated to form Carnegie Steel Company.

In 1901, at the age of 66 he sold the Carnegie Steel Company to banker John Pierpont Morgan for \$480 million. After Carnegie sold his steel company, the diminutive titan, who stood 5'3", retired from business and devoted himself full-time to philanthropy. In 1889, he had written an essay, "The Gospel of Wealth," in which he stated that the rich have "a moral obligation to distribute their money in ways that promote the welfare and happiness of the common man." Carnegie also said, "The man who dies rich dies disgraced."

Carnegie eventually gave away some \$350 million (the equivalent of billions in today's money), which represented the bulk of his wealth. Among his philanthropic activities, he funded the establishment of more than 2,500 public libraries around the globe, donated more than 7,600 organs to churches worldwide and endowed organizations (many still in existence today) dedicated to research in science, education, world peace and other causes. Among his gifts was the \$1.1 million required for the land and construction costs of Carnegie Hall, the legendary New York City concert venue that opened in 1891. The Carnegie Institution for Science, Carnegie Mellon University and the Carnegie Foundation were all established thanks to his financial gifts. A lover of books, he was the largest individual investor in public libraries in American history.

Andrew Carnegie Quotes:

"Do real and permanent good in this world." Andrew Carnegie

"Wealth is not to feed the egos but to feed the hungry and to help people help themselves."

"Surplus wealth is a sacred trust to be managed for the good of others."

"A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert."

Now here's the crunch. And it may come as a surprise. Carnegie wasn't a Christian.

Carnegie rejected Christianity, and was delighted to replace those views with evolution: "Not only had I got rid of the theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth of evolution," he wrote in his 1920 autobiography, published the year after his death. When applied to for money by missionaries to China, Carnegie wrote: "I think that money spent upon foreign missions for China is not only money misspent, but that we do a grievous wrong to the Chinese by trying to force our religion upon them against their wishes."

And about Christianity he wrote:

"The whole scheme of Christian Salvation is diabolical, as revealed by the creeds. An angry God: imagine such a creator of the universe. Angry at what he knew was coming and was himself responsible for. Then he sets himself about to beget a son, in order that the child should beg him to forgive the Sinner. This however he cannot or will not do. He must punish somebody — so the son offers himself up; and our creator punishes the innocent youth, never heard of before — for the guilty and became reconciled to us. ... I decline to accept Salvation from such a fiend."

Whew! Strong stuff.

So what are we to make of people such as Andrew Carnegie? A philanthropist, yet not a Christian. So what motivated him?

The only answer I can give to this conundrum is that each person on earth is made in God's image, and so we all — all of us — have within us some of God's nature, some of his characteristics.

The other thing to say is that we can and should learn a great deal from non-Christians; sometimes they put us to shame with their acts of kindness and donations to good causes. If those who are not Christians give all this money away, how much more should we? We who have a motive within the love of our generous God?

But let me add this.

A study done by a wealth research firm found that 56.2% of the 13.1 million millionaires in the world were Christians, [while 6.5% were Muslims, 3.9% were Hindu, and 1.7% were Jewish; 31.7% were identified as adherents of "other" religions or "not religious".]

John D Rockefeller (sorry both my examples are American!) said 'I believe it is a religious duty to get all the money you can, fairly and honestly; to keep all you can, and to give away all you can.'

He was at one time America's richest man in his day, owning about 2% of USA's entire GDP. And he, you will be pleased to hear, was a devout Christian.

Returning to the second reading, in Ch 9 we find Paul still urging the Corinthians to be generous, because if they sow generously they will reap generously. Now I know some, particularly in the US, have taken this passage to mean that all Christians should become rich, or else we haven't enough faith – the so-called 'Prosperity Gospel' – but I'm sure that's not what it means. But wise use of money is a vital part of our service to God, just as wise use of our tongue and wise use of our time are also part of a healthy Christian life.

In conclusion, I don't think anyone here tonight is as rich as Carnegie or Rockefeller. Perhaps that's a good thing. Carnegie once said 'Millionaires rarely smile'. Wealth can be a snare and a delusion.

But we each have a certain amount of money and we should be wise stewards of it. The Biblical principle of 10% to be given away I think still applies, and I can vouch for our family that God has never let us down all the time we have given away 10% - even when times were tight. Jesus said 'Love your neighbour', which includes acting when they are in need.

Paul concludes by asking, in effect, 'Can you, who have been so generously treated by God, be anything but generous to fellow human beings?'

Well?