

Daily Reflections Booklet



Generous June is an initiative that seeks to engage churches, communities and individuals with generosity, by encouraging understanding and promoting activity throughout the month of June.

www.generousjune.co.uk



The Generous June Daily Reflection Booklet: journeying with generosity through 2 Corinthians

Welcome to Generous June 2021!

Generous June is an initiative that seeks to engage churches, communities and individuals with generosity throughout the month of June – we're so excited to go on this journey with you!

Within this booklet you will find 30 individual written reflections, one for each day throughout the month of June. Join with voices across the diocese and beyond, as we delve into Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and reflect on the biblical truths of giving and generosity.

This booklet is designed to accompany the Generous June Podcast that will be released daily on the Generous June website, and on Apple Podcasts and Spotify. We understand that not everyone has access to a downloadable podcast service, so we have produced this booklet so that a hard copy of the reflections is available and can be read by you at your leisure, in your own time and at your pace.

Feel free to print this booklet for yourself and use it personally, or if you are a church leader then you might consider printing a few of these booklets and handing them out to those who don't have access to a computer and still want to be a part of Generous June 2021. Please do ask if you would like the Generous June Team to print a batch of these booklets for you, as this can be arranged on a case by case basis.

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” - 2 Corinthians 9:15

“Allow his abundance to flow through us and out to others” - Bishop Debbie

“For God loves a cheerful giver” - 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

“From gratitude comes generosity” - Bishop David

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

God is our comfort

Over the last year there have been several memory-making, even culture-changing moments when we have sensed a need for deep comfort and compassion. This has been expressed in our own communities: prescriptions and shopping have been collected; the gentle and authentic asking after a neighbour's well-being; the selfless commitment of key workers and those who have practically comforted and cared for the sick and dying. There has also been a ministry of comfort from those who have voiced a prophetic call in response to devastating events – those taking the knee after George Floyd's death; Amanda Gordon's poem "The hill we climb" at President Biden's inauguration at the site of the riots two weeks previously and the many women who held vigil after Sarah Everards brutal death.

In these opening words of 1 Corinthians the word comfort is used ten times. The word comfort can be described in three different ways: to call someone to come near; to make a strong appeal and to treat someone else in an inviting or friendly way. I believe that in the aftermath of deep distress and unprecedented isolation we are being called to comfort one another as God comforts us. The God who meets us where we are and then brings us to a point where we are strong enough to see new hope, new possibilities, and new ways forward.

The God of all compassion and comfort offers himself to us so that we too can offer comfort to others. That is the extraordinary cycle and dynamic of giving and generosity. We have seen it in the time, concern and offering of so many during the pandemic. This cycle of grace lies at the heart of the character of God and therefore of his people. The source of compassion and comfort is first God's giving of himself. Paul reminds us that what is true for Jesus becomes true in the life of his people - death and resurrection, suffering and comfort, lie at the heart of the Christian story.

Each day this month we are invited through these podcasts to enter that cycle of grace, gift, gratitude, and generosity.

God of all comfort and compassion, whose generous love transforms all people, create in me a heart to seek your will, that formed in the image of your Son I may give myself and my possessions in response to your call.

Amen

2 Corinthians 1:8-12

God has delivered us and answered prayers

Early on in this second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul is addressing a particular relief gift that had been organised for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem facing famine. Paul was concerned the Corinthians might not commit to giving towards it and he takes the opportunity to remind them about generosity - not just through finances but through the holistic transformation that comes from the gospel, which is in itself the ultimate story of generosity.

Through financial metaphors, speaking of the gracious favour of God (v11), Paul is communicating that it is through the riches of God's grace that we find true and lasting wealth. When we let that sink deeply into our lives to the very core of who we are, a life of humility and generosity will follow.

In verse 9, Paul reminds the church to rely on God rather than human strength, a theme that runs throughout this letter as he later writes in 12:9, '[The Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."' This is written in the context of the church in Corinth looking towards other impressive leaders with seemingly attractive attributes who were making accusations about Paul and his messengers. In return, Paul states that his credentials are that he is, 'relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace' (v12).

It is not our job to seem impressive, but to point to the one who really is! We read that what really matters is following the way of Jesus with integrity and sincerity in weakness. As we respond to the love and mercy of Christ, our values, and our way of seeing the world are transformed.

As well as embracing this call to live in humility and generosity today, we can draw strength from this passage. Whatever we are facing today may we testify with Paul in verse 10 that, 'He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us'. On him we have set our hope - a hope that is firm and secure that will continue to transform us and the world around us.

2 Corinthians 1:13-24

We are anointed by God

I wonder if today's passage brings to mind the character Jim Trott from the Vicar of Dibley for you too? Jim is a long-standing member of Dibley's parish council. Whenever Jim is asked a question, he tends to stutter no no no no, before finally saying his answer 'yes'. I suspect all of us have moments where we're hesitant, not quite sure... no no no... yes!

Paul is making clear that his answers are not like that... he is trustworthy, his answers have been reliable... but even more so, he spells out that 'In Jesus, every one of God's promises is a 'yes"... an absolutely, unequivocal 'yes'.

We have this totally faithful, trustworthy God...
and this God has put his seal on us...

In Paul's time, a seal was a sign of ownership, for animals and slaves... and a sign of identity of a particular group... in an era where society was very structured, and income, livelihood and survival depended on that belonging somewhere... that seal was a sign of safety, connection and belonging.

So, God is putting his seal on us... we belong, we find our identity, our safety in God....

God is giving each of us a great big yes. How awesome is that!

This isn't just a personal me, God thing... being marked with a seal was a corporate thing too, a belonging to each other... the seal on 'us'.

But it gets even better... the generosity of God, being with us in Christ flows out to us too...

giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment.... just the first instalment... This is a bit mind-bending stuff... as if once wasn't 'enough'!

Not only is it in Jesus that every one of God's promises is a yes...

We see God's generosity with us too, this flowing of the spirit in our hearts, God's yes is to us too. This abundance of God.

This isn't to go to our heads... for us to try and be bigger than who we are... to lord it over others...

But it's also not a dour duty, burden, or obligation.

God's abundant generosity in Christ with us.... His spirit in our hearts gives us that security of belonging in the faith...

And that comes out in joy...

We belong to each other; we work with each other for joy...

Just take a moment and let that sink in... God's generosity to us, invites us to respond with joy.... And to work with each other for enjoyment...

Augustine reminds us of the distinction between what we use, which gets used up and is a means to something else.... And what we enjoy, which is of value for its own sake...

For me, this passage reminds us that we're invited to be generous with each other, to enjoy the people around us (many of whom the world rejects with a big no).... We're called not to treat each other with the no no no no yes answer.... But to put into practice God's utter yes of Jesus with us.... And our response, in joy and through the spirit, is yes... to generously be with and delight in each other.

2 Corinthians 9:15

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift”

I wonder what gifts you have received that lead you instinctively to a response of gratitude. Often, it's the unexpected gifts – the meal left on the doorstep when you're going through a bad time; the flowers sent just to say you're being thought about; the homemade loaf of bread fresh from the oven because your neighbour had made more than he needed.

The verse I read at the beginning comes in a passage that speaks of the overflowing nature of generosity that comes from God. Three episodes in the history of God's people are referenced – a verse in Proverbs that comes in a chapter offering wisdom on riches and poverty; a psalm that was sung reminding the people that acts of generosity lead to righteousness; a prophecy from Isaiah that speaks of a God of abundance, who gives his children all they need, and more. So, what is Paul saying to the church in Corinth?

He is reminding them of the nature of God – a God of abundance. And the call to his people is to be like that. In Jesus we see what that looks like translated into human behaviour. Jesus modelled this in the way we used his time – spending time with the poor, those in need, those on the edges. And Jesus spoke in parables that painted a picture of a Kingdom of growth – the mustard seed growing to be the tallest tree, the yeast proving the dough.

As Christians we know that everything we have comes from God – and our response to that is a life of gratitude – thanks be to God!

That instinctive response will shape our life and we will find ourselves more and more living lives that model that of Jesus – a life of gratitude that becomes a life of generosity. Some of us find that easier than others – we can be either glass half full or glass half empty people. Listen to these words of wisdom from Charlie Mackesy in the book, 'The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse':

*'Is your glass half empty or half full? asked the mole
I think I'm grateful to have a glass, said the boy.'*

As we respond in gratitude to all that God has given us – unexpected, undeserved – we allow his abundance to flow through us and out to others.

Augustine knew this God – who he addresses in his Confessions:

'You gather all things to yourself, though you suffer no need. You support, you fill, and you protect all things. You create them, nourish them, and bring them to perfection. You seek to make them your own, though you lack for nothing'. Take a moment to recognise all that God has given you and give thanks for his indescribable gift.

2 Corinthians 2:1-13

The ability to forgive is given by Christ

One might suggest that forgiveness is the hardest gift to give as well as to receive. Forgiveness requires the ultimate act in generosity. It can take us to the depths of our emotions. Sometimes, forgiving ourselves is the hardest thing to do too. But in Christ we have the knowledge that over and over again we believe in a God that gives the ultimate gift – the generosity of forgiveness over and over and over again.

As a teenager I was introduced to the Taizé Community. At the age of 18 I spent 18 months there as a volunteer. It was a life shaping and transforming experience. I have returned many times since both for spiritual refreshment but also to introduce others to the community and their mission of unity. In 2005, during evening prayer, in the midst of summer, surrounded by his fellow monks (brothers) and thousands of young people, the founder of the community, Brother Roger was brutally murdered.

A week or so after his death, along with tens of thousands of others, I attended Brother Roger's funeral. The new Prior of the community, Br Alois expressed this prayer 'God of Goodness, we entrust to your forgiveness the person who, in an act of sickness, put an end to the life of our Brother Roger. With Christ on the cross, we say to you: Father, forgive her; she does not know what she did.' The overwhelming sense at that funeral service was one of forgiveness – of the generosity of heart that ran like a river through the community. In the book in homage to Br Roger's life, forgiveness is described as 'one of the greatest risks...to forgive: this is as far as love can go.....the assurance of forgiveness is the most unheard of, the most unbelievable, the most generous of Gospel realities. It makes us free, incomparably so.'

Christ, through the cross, enables us to be free. Those words of Christ (and prayed on that August day in 2005 in Taizé) 'Father, forgive them.....' resonate time and again. Do we have the generosity of spirit to forgive – to give of ourselves so that we are freed to give in other ways too and fulfil our potential in God? Releasing the joy that will, sometimes after a time, come from forgiveness in order for us to be fulfilled in our faith and walk with God? The gift of forgiveness is also so life-giving in the faith communities of which we are a part. It releases something in us and around us that might be difficult to express, but opens up in us all a generosity through that trust in God and gives us a renewed freedom. I conclude with some more words from Taizé and Brother Roger:

Will you welcome each new day as God's today?

In every season, will you find ways of discovering life's poetry,
on days full of light as well as in winter's frozen nights?

Will you discover how to bring joy to your humble dwelling by small signs that cheer the heart?

Gather everything that happens, trivialities included, without reservation, regret or nostalgia, in
inexhaustible wonder.

Set out, going forward one step at a time, from doubt towards faith,
not worrying about the impossible ahead.

Light fire, even with the thorns that tear you.

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

We are the aroma of Christ

In today's reading, Paul talks about the Church and people of God as being the aroma of Christ. Paul's use of the idea of a triumphal procession is really helpful in understanding what the aroma of Christ means. Triumphal processions were great public occasions when the victory of a battle was celebrated. The general would lead the procession and music and incense were used as part of the ceremony. The incense burnt to the gods in a Roman triumphal procession smelled wonderful to a Roman as it symbolised victory. However, the same aroma was a bad smell to a captive prisoner of war in the parade, who would soon be executed or sold into slavery.

Think of the word 'aroma' and things like spices or cooking come to mind. Or think of a synonym like 'fragrance' and the idea of a sweet perfume comes to mind. Or think of another synonym like 'smell' and perhaps we start to think of more unpleasant things like the bin that desperately needs taking out. The sense of smell remains in our memories like no other sense. A certain smell can take us back to a holiday we went on 10 years ago – the smell of tar takes me back to when I was in Monaco when they were doing roadworks in 30-degree heat. A specific perfume can remind us of a special day or the person that wore it – there's a perfume my mum always wore when I was young so when I smell that scent, I think of my mum.

Aromas and smells can bring about specific memories, ideas, and feelings. In the triumphal procession, the fragrance of incense is unseen, however, the effects of it cannot go unnoticed. Similarly, our actions emit aromas which again, cannot go unnoticed.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 that when we give to the needy, we mustn't announce it with trumpets to be honoured by others, but to give in secret, not letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing. Instead of seeking reward, we should give to the needy as an act of selfless generosity. And so, in a similar vein to Jesus, Paul helps us to understand that our actions have an effect, whether good or bad, a pleasing fragrance or a bad smell. In the context of Generous June, our generosity, whether that be giving our time or money, is not without effect.

Selfless giving, whether that be our time or money, as Jesus describes in Matthew 6, gives a pleasing aroma, one that stays in people's memories for good and one that rejoices and praises God.

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

We have confidence and competence through Christ

My husband is a keen sailor. He's part of a sailing club with access to two yachts on the Hamble and is often found out on the Solent in all weathers. I, however, am a confirmed landlubber. There's not much I dislike more than sailing. I know that my husband would love it if I ever gained a qualification called "Competent Crew". However, when I look at what is involved in gaining such a qualification (a five-day course on board a yacht) there is little chance that it's something I could ever achieve. There's a lot to be learned before you can be deemed competent crew – and I guess that's fair enough to ensure safety on the seas and to avoid troubling the RNLI or coastguard with incompetent sailors.

Throughout life, it's possible to pick up many competencies. If you've ever passed a driving test, then you know how much effort that was for you. Some people spend hours practising a musical instrument or a sport – and of course as competence grows, so does confidence – and we end up in a virtuous spiral of improvement that results in a gift or talent being honed and polished. A few may even achieve excellence! But even to become competent and confident in anything, there usually has to be quite a lot of effort on our part.

Paul writes to the Corinthian church about confidence and competence. But this competence is not on a musical instrument, or as a sailor. Instead, it is competence as a minister or servant of the message of God in Jesus. This competence and confidence does not come about as a result of hours of practice or study. Instead, it is simply given by God. It's as if I woke up one morning suddenly able to tell a jib from a halyard and confident to handle a helm. Like every other aspect of the Christian life, it is sheer gift.

God has made Paul, his fellow apostles, and through them the whole church competent, worthy, and fit to live lives of service to the gospel and to share the life of the Spirit with others. God has given his very self – through the person of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit to the church, and this gift has meant that all we need to live and share this life is already written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit. God has given us all that we need by way of confidence and competence in Jesus because he has given us himself.

In case you think competence doesn't sound like a very lofty ambition, and we should be pursuing excellence, consider this – we already have from God all that we need to be walking references for the Christian life. Pursuing excellence and seeking to live by more than we have already been given by God means relying on our own strength rather than God's. And we might never get there!

Living a full, abundant life that mirrors the generosity of God is achievable for all of us precisely because it doesn't depend on our ambition or abilities. There is nothing to hold us back from being walking references to Jesus and the life he brings. God has already given us the competence and confidence – and the only certificate of competence we need is the life we live.

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

This train is bound for glory

In this bible passage Paul mentions 'glory' eleven times in five verses, which is going some. I don't find it particularly easy to read as a result, but the notion of glory is clearly something Paul sees as profoundly important. Glory can be understood in two different ways. As a boy I became a supporter of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, in part because of the quote from one of their managers that echoed around the old stadium: "The game is about glory, it is about doing things in style". That's one understanding of glory – magnificence or great beauty, a gleaming wonder, 'a glorious sunny day'. Glory can also be about honour for great achievements (a kind of glory that Spurs, alas, seem incapable of achieving). I suspect in this passage both meanings apply, but it is God who has done the achieving for us.

Sometimes, though, it can be a bit of a stretch to imagine we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another as Paul says. Life can feel rather more like a repetitious eddying around our failings and flaws that refuse to budge. Living generously can sometimes feel like yet another thing we don't do as well as we should. Why aren't we more forgiving, more patient, more thoughtful, more loving, more compassionate, more generous? Why do we keep going around in circles rather than moving, changing, and growing?

A mistake can be to think this change or growth is something we initiate, or that we are responsible for. The truth is living generously is itself a spiritual gift, a gift freely given by God. Galatians 5 tells us that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control". The beautiful prayer of St Anselm expresses our struggles with generosity perfectly: "I owe you more than my whole self, but I have no more, and by myself, I cannot render the whole of it to you". As Paul says, it is not us but God who is at work transforming us 'from one degree of glory to another' – a progressive sanctification as some scholars have called it – so that we increasingly reflect the God who created us. Living generously therefore must start with this prayer for the spiritual gift of generosity, for the Spirit to give us the energy and drive to live the generous life we long to live.

The song 'this train is bound for glory' communicates this wonderfully. The rhythm perfectly reflects the repetitious sounds of train travel, and that sense of heading to a specific destination, with the promise of the moment of arrival. No sense of meandering futility, but of a journey that leads inevitably from one degree of glory to another until God's full glory is revealed in us. The journey is not powered by us, and we have the great blessing to be a passenger. The tempo, the momentum, the joy of it – all comes from God, powered by God, given by God. We are joyous passengers, enjoying the glorious splendour of it all. Thanks be to God! This train is bound for glory!

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

The life in us is Christ at work

I admit to having a soft spot for these verses.

As a teenager I was ready to give up. It was a year since I'd decided to 'do business with God' and commit to following him. One year on, I was utterly miserable, totally disillusioned and immensely lonely. Despite being surrounded by crowds of people, I felt really isolated, because none of them wanted to take their own faith, or my faith seriously. I lost heart. I wanted to give up.

But then I encountered these verses, and there was one line that just made my heart sing. 'There are many enemies, but we are never without a friend.' Vs 9. It was the Good News Version I was reading and it spoke into my darkness, not fixing my situation, not suddenly making me popular or understood, but taking me beyond the mess, the brokenness and the loneliness to the treasure beyond. It brought me to Jesus Christ. And he kept me going.

My journey through life with Jesus regularly brings me back to these verses, and I encounter them in new ways as my situation changes and my understanding grows. I take delight in seeing myself as a jar of clay (with numerous cracks, let's admit it) shaped by God the great craftsmen; I am challenged in the call to plain speaking when witnessing to God's amazing work; I am sobered by the reminder that the way of Christ is the way through suffering, not avoiding it. But each time, no matter the complexity or layers I delve into, I'm brought back to the treasure. To Jesus Christ.

It's tempting to think that the treasure we hold within us is a strategy or plan to solve lots of problems, or maybe is a logical or persuasive idea to the big questions we face, or even an attractive & marketable image that will appeal to everyone. That's not our treasure.

The treasure we carry in us is a person. The person of Jesus Christ and the life he lived, the death he died, and life he claimed for all. The person of Jesus Christ who reveals to us the glory of God in the darkness. The person of Jesus Christ who is constantly at work through sacrifice & death, through resurrection and redemption to bring his life and love to the world. We have a treasure that never runs out, is never passive and never depends on situations (or us) being perfect before shining through.

And so, as we encounter these verses once again in our journeys with Christ, can we imagine what it would look like to be generous with the treasure of Christ? Maybe to dwell and not rush away from conversations that reflect his love; to persist with the projects that are unglamorous but reflect his redeeming nature; to invest in the marginalised so they can reflect to us all God's glory. And let's not worry about being jars of clay, for the treasure within us is priceless.

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

Fix our eyes on the unseen eternal God

When the UK Government admits that its Benefit System 'can be complicated at the best of times', it is hardly an encouragement to seek help! Here, St Paul tells the church in Corinth that they are all in receipt of 'benefits'. He writes, 'All this is for your benefit' (v15). But what was it that was to their benefit?

There were significant difficulties to be overcome in Corinth, yet Paul reminds them that they are nevertheless united in the 'benefit' of resurrection. Notice that in v14 he says that they 'believe and speak' the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead which gives grounds for their belief that the 'One who raised Jesus from the dead will raise them all too with Christ and present us together in his presence.'

Paul's persecution as a follower of Jesus was well documented and the church's problems in accepting his authority would have been no secret either. These were troubling times in Corinth and a solution was needed if the ministry and mission of the church was to succeed in 'reaching more people with the grace of God with thanksgiving overflowing to the glory of God'(v15).

Losing sight of the 'benefits' of resurrection to our own lives and failing to resolve differences can destroy our unity and prevent us from speaking what 'we believe with the same spirit of faith' (v13). Here in today's verses, we find a persuasive connection between the 'reluctant disciples' who received this letter AD55 and the 'resistant disciple' I can be as I read it today. I too need to be reminded of those 'benefits' which flow from a personal and shared faith in the resurrection. And it is in understanding these 'benefits' that will enable us [me] 'not to lose heart' in the worst of times. Whether enduring relentless persecution like Paul or living through painful relationships like the Corinthians, we are in these verses called back to what matters the most, to the benefits which flow to us and through us from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And what benefits they are! Did you know that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead two thousand years ago is available to us right now to transform and empower us to live holy lives (Ephesians 1 v22)? The story many tell of their own resurrection from the dead, having received new life in Christ, is of personal transformation which is expressed in many ways. For me, I have the discovered peace, even in my most destructive pain; trust has been recovered in the most testing of relationships; I've experienced the healing of deep hurts, been empowered to overcome personal objections and most gloriously, learned to love my life again. For me, these are the gloriously 'uncomplicated 'benefits' of resurrection which flow from my faith in a resurrected Christ!

Generous June calls us to a joyful generosity in our support of the ministry and mission of God which is to declare and display the 'benefits' of his resurrection as they flow into our lives! I can't help but wonder if Paul's emphasis on resurrection unveils his confidence that sharing together in the sin busting resurrection power of Jesus was their only hope of ever being reconciled and united again. He knew that only a resurrected people speaks less of our difficulties and seek to support others in theirs. A resurrected church will think less of its own pain and work together to relieve the pain of others. In short, when we get the benefit, others will gain the blessing! Now that's a Benefit system worth supporting and as we give generously in support of the ministry and mission of our parishes, others will hear of the resurrection of Jesus and be empowered to live lives which will simply overflow to the glory of God, with gratitude, not just for the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, but for their own! And that would be mission accomplished in Corinth, and wherever you serve your risen Saviour!

2 Corinthians 9:15

“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift”

It is always God's movement towards us that invites a response. That response is one of thankfulness but also of action. That action, the giving of oneself in response to God's gift to us, involves a generosity that can mean giving our time, our energy, our friendship, our space, our money and possessions.

Grace, Gift, Gratitude and Generosity are four evocative words that have helped me to understand the indescribable gift that is Jesus himself. In John 1, Jesus is described as The Word who became flesh and dwelt amongst us, it is this first movement of God that leads us to faith. It was this understanding and experience that in Jesus God gives himself to us that led me as a young man to become a Christian. The second word gift is very close to the word grace and Paul uses this word in 2 Corinthians – literally meaning “God's favour”.

We are called to live every day attentive to that favour, gift, or grace – not some lofty theological concept, but a moment by moment appreciation, unique to each day. This might be a moment of beauty, of colour, texture, or sound; an appreciation of companionship; the awe and wonder of creation, the taste or smell of good coffee all comprised of moment-by-moment gifts from a God who loves us so deeply, and so values the goodness of creation, that the eternal Word would become human and live among us. Immanuel – God is with us.

In the face of such an indescribable gift the only response is gratitude. Those who live with an “attitude of gratitude” find surprising transformation! They tend to be much more positive, have a higher self-esteem and less materialistic than others, more willing to forgive and help others.

From gratitude comes generosity. At first sight this seems a paradox, for surely gratitude is about what you have received, and generosity is what you give. I prefer to think of it as a loop or cycle of gratitude and generosity, deeply connected and intertwined. It starts in the heart of God, a divine grace, it leads to thankfulness, like Paul, a gratitude for the gifts of each day and then comes full circle and produces a sort of human grace where we give generously to one another.

We are called to live with open hands, gratefully remembering God's indescribable gift, his sustaining and gracious presence in every moment, and then our relationships thrive and our soul stops diminishing and we are invited to enter an abundant living – where we celebrate God's grace, revealed fully in Jesus. If we believe that God is the source and sustainer of all good gifts, then our only reasonable response is gratitude that leads to loving God and neighbour. God has gone to unfathomable extremes to be in relationship with us. A generous soul will emerge from the grateful part of us, aware of the gifts of each day and immersed in the grace of Jesus.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

Amen

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

We walk by faith and not by sight

Walking is described in the dictionary as “moving at a regular pace by lifting and setting down each foot in turn, never having both feet off the ground at once”. It’s not flying, running, or even jogging – it’s not especially fast or exciting, indeed for many of us – it just “is”, and we rarely give it much, if any thought. In fact, if we start to think about it too much it can suddenly seem rather complex and awkward!

When it comes to being generous, there is maybe a temptation to overthink the how, why, and when – to get caught up in different theories, to worry we haven’t or aren’t enough or to worry about whether we’ve got it right. It’s all too easy to feel we don’t know where to start – that we don’t know what to give or to who. Maybe we are familiar with the focus being on money which often has the effect of immediately making us feel uncomfortable – even defensive sometimes.

When we hear Paul talking about walking, or living as other translations use, by faith, in today’s reading, I believe he is challenging us to keep a constant reminder of the bigger picture, to remember at all times that God is bigger, that he holds the future, that he determines and guides our steps. If we are walking through life in this way – keeping in mind we do not know the full story, the full picture, then we will find being generous sort of just flows from us.

I believe Paul is challenging us here to trust that God will use what we offer him – what we give. We aren’t asked to spend hours worrying whether we are giving the right amount, to the right person or organisation, or whether we should give one item instead of another (although it can be right to consider these things prayerfully) – but instead I believe we are asked just to give – to give without questioning whether we are right or not but trusting that God will use what we give him. Just as with our walking – to just do it, for it to be a part of how we live.

When I was working as a physio, many years ago, I remember the sheer joy when a patient who, for whatever reason was having to learn or re-learn how to walk, managed their first steps – a myriad of complex reactions, synapses and processes and often months of careful and sometimes painstakingly slow training and rehabilitation, and suddenly it all came together, and walking was achieved.

I have often found those who have not given their giving hours of thought to be the most generous – when those struggling for food themselves bring along a donation to the foodbank so that they can be part of helping others – even if it’s just because they didn’t like it, this inbuilt, un thought through generosity can teach all of us a lot. I will never forget many instances when we lived in rural Nigeria, of people inviting us into their homes and sharing wholeheartedly, what they hardly had themselves.

Generosity needs to be part of us putting one foot in front of the other, part of the mundane activity we call walking as it were, as we go through life, living in the faith that God holds us and all he has given us. And yet, when we do this, when we manage it, the joy and delight it can bring and the effects it can have are as stark and awe inspiring as seeing those patients take their first tentative steps after months of learning or rehabilitation.

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

Jesus died for us so we should live for him and not ourselves

We have probably all heard the quote 'it's better to give than to receive'. I'm a firm believer in this quote as a natural gift giver. I love the process of finding the best gift to give somebody, I'm that annoying person who has a spreadsheet across the year so I'm ready for Christmas! Some people are easy for me to buy presents for because I almost can't outgive them! I love them so much and they give me so much in my life that it's easy to be motivated to find the perfect gift for them, whatever the cost.

We should feel the same about giving everything to Jesus. I love that the word salvation comes from the same root as the word salvage. Jesus sees us in our muck and mess and he repairs us. He puts us back together, polishes us up and says: YOU are worth something. YOU are valuable. The whole Christian life is us responding to that amazing truth.

In today's passage, 2 Corinthians 5:11-15, it's obvious that love is the motive for that response to Jesus but also the message to those we represent Christ to.

We cannot outgive Jesus and I think we forget this all too easily. Verse 15 says that "he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again". This great love is the motive for us to give everything to him, he did so much for us in love, and this love (as it says in verse 14) compels us to respond.

Part of my job involves working with students and they are often confused by the free gifts that we give. This past academic year has obviously been different, but in the past, we'd offer free ice creams as they move in and run a free coffee house every Wednesday during the semester. Students would be baffled that we would just give something away with no strings attached and I often joke with other members of the team that they may not be quite ready to experience the ultimate free gift of salvation. We would explain that we, as Christians, simply love them and want to bless them. We wanted to show them the message of God's love to them because we had received it in full.

As we consider our generosity and wonder how we might give everything to Jesus let's remember that he gave everything for us, so we must live for him and not for ourselves. His love for us is the motive for our response to him, as well as the message that we tell others.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

The old has gone, the new has come

One of my surprises in lockdown was the gentle comfort I got from watching the TV programme, The Repair Shop. Filmed in the Weald and Downland Living Museum, members of the public bring along much loved items to the barn for repair. The items have lost their sparkle, they're broken and need to be carefully restored by the experts there. The reveal at the end is always one of emotion as people discover their much-loved possession brought back to life. The marks of age are still there, the character is maintained but the sparkle returns, and the objects can be used for what they were designed to be.

Paul is reminding the church in Corinth of the amazing truth that, in Christ, we become a new creation. Jesus came to earth, amongst other things, to usher in the new Kingdom and as Christians we live in the hope of what is to come, seeing signs of the Kingdom around us and living with the promise that this Kingdom will reach fulfilment in God's perfect timing. And we are made new – as we turn to Christ, so we begin a new way of living. But God isn't making something new out of nothing. This is the creation, our lives included, that God has begun from the very beginning. The world has corrupted what God has made and so, as he does the work of reconciling us to himself, we become the people and the world that God has always intended us to be.

I remember a conversation with a friend when we were student and she was beginning to explore what faith might mean for her life. I want to know Jesus more, she said, but I'm scared that it will mean I will need to become someone different. And what we read here in Corinthians is the opposite of that – as we draw closer to Jesus, we become our true selves and can find freedom and joy in living as we have been made.

I wonder where we feel completely at ease to be our true selves – that can be hard and so often we wear a mask. But the joy of this promise is that God knows us – as Psalm 139 says, we are fearfully and wonderfully made – God knows us so well.

So, what parts of our old life do we need to shed – where do we need to be restored and renewed so that our lives might shine with the glory of God? We have been made new – are we living that as a reality or are we clinging on to the old self?

Let's live as children of the heavenly Father who showers us with his love – fills us with his grace – and calls us to live new lives in the Kingdom of God.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2

Now is the time of God's favour

We may wonder what is meant by God's Grace – one definition I have seen which is helpful is 'The enjoyment of Divine favour'. This being given freely to all who ask. Paul is asking the Corinthians to open their hearts to him as a messenger from God, as well as God himself. The day of salvation is now. When we talk about Grace I almost certainly think of the words of the Hymn, Amazing Grace. Written by John Newman.

*Amazing grace!-how sweet the sound-
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
was blind, but now I see.*

These words written by a man who was a slave trader and lived a sinful life. He had a moment of realisation and converted to Christianity and became a Priest in the Church of England. He met William Wilberforce and encouraged him in his work against slavery. And he wrote this powerful hymn. These words are heartfelt and have a real meaning for all come to Christianity. God's Grace is powerful, even though we may not always feel it.

My husband died 14 months ago – very suddenly and other sad events soon after meant I lost other things close to me. Before this happened, I was grateful for my life – full and happy. Then suddenly all was changed. Friends would say, but you have your faith. However, at that moment I was bereaved and angry with God. I was not as faithful as I should have been, nor as resolute as Job.

But I came to realize that although I could not feel God's comfort, it was there all around me in the love and support from family, friends, and neighbours. Friends prayed for me every day. I now believe that God had me surrounded by a ring of love. His Grace was there, whether I wanted it or not. We are not promised a bed of roses, nor a life where we do not experience pain, loss or hurt. But God's love is always there, and Jesus walks alongside. He came to earth so he could share our suffering. The world is a beautiful place, with conditions just right for life. We have the gift of a new day, every day. That being so, we should be generous in our response to God's gifts – with our time and talents, such as we have, and when possible, with our money. There is enough to go round, if properly shared.

So, this June, as you enjoy the Summer, think how many ways you can be generous – with your time, maybe volunteering, your kindnesses to friends and strangers, your skills, and your giving, to church and or charities, who reach out to those in need.

God's Grace is good, so let us respond in kind. God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

Rich generosity

In verse 2 of today's passage, Paul tells us that the Macedonians gave 'In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.' To me, this verse might seem like a bit of a contradiction. The Macedonians went from extreme poverty to rich generosity. How could the Macedonians be richly generous but extremely poor?

How does this representation of generosity relate to today's understanding of richness?

In today's society, the phrase 'rich generosity' could conjure up a whole host of different images. To some it might infer those that have a lot giving generously from their wealth, or to others it might appear a paradox; how can someone be rich in generosity, because surely generosity is about giving away? Whoever became rich by giving away?

There was a song we used to sing in primary school called 'The Magic Penny'. It centred on the symbol of a magic penny, 'hold it tight and you won't have any, lend it spend it and you'll have so many, they'll roll all over the floor'... I'm sure many of you know it and I apologise now for getting the tune stuck in your head for the rest of the day!

But in its essence, does the Magic Penny give us a real understanding of giving and true generosity? The Macedonians in this passage were living with extreme poverty. A penny might have been all that they had. But they gave in rich generosity to what Paul mentions is "first of all to the lord and then by the will of God also to us". The challenge here is to look at what our understanding of rich generosity is – to reverse our own understanding on these values. Were the Macedonians rich in wealth and possessions? No. They were rich with an understanding of God's love and the importance of giving back to him with everything that they had – they gave what they had and they received much more. The amount we give is not as important as why and how we give. God does not want us to give gifts grudgingly. Instead, he wants to give as these churches did – out of dedication to Christ, love for fellow believers, the joy of helping those in need, as well as that it was simply the good and right thing to do.

The second verse of the Magic Penny goes 'Money's dandy and we like to use it, but love is better if you don't refuse it.' God's love is best and to those that accept it have the opportunity to respond through generosity, bringing us closer to him and developing our understanding of what he has given us. The giving of our money, our possessions and ourselves is too often a duty rather than a privilege. In opening up ourselves to living in a rich relationship with God, we can see a new understanding of what it is to truly give in rich generosity.

2 Corinthians 8:6-9

Excelling in the grace of giving

As a bishop I normally visit several Churches each week and as I am praying am often asking the Lord to build up and encourage the Church I am visiting.

Paul writes to a Church that has a remarkable group of Christians in it. They are known for their faith, speech, knowledge, and their enthusiasm. Paul challenges the Corinthian Church to also excel in their giving. The keyword that he uses is “charis” or “grace”. All spiritual gifts are a gift of grace and Paul, without embarrassment, puts the invitation to give financially alongside the other gifts that the church is so proud of. Paul is not concerned simply to raise money but to change the way the Corinthians think about money.

Earlier in this passage Paul points to a much poorer community, the Macedonians, whose gift of grace has meant a staggering generosity with money and he ends this passage by pointing to the grace of Jesus, “who though he was rich yet for your sakes became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich. The model for financial giving is the gracious self-giving of Jesus. The challenge for me is not how much I give but how much of me is in my giving.

Martin Luther said we needed three conversions: of the heart when we know God loves us, of the mind when we learn to think as Christian people and of the purse. He added that if faith has not touched your purse or your wallet, then it is likely that it has not adequately penetrated either the heart or the mind.

Billy Graham described our chequebooks as theological documents. Today he might say your list of digital payees are your theological framework. Is your giving reflected in that payee list? How would that change if you caught sight of the grace of excelling in giving?

Lord Jesus, may I daily grow in the grace of giving, that like the Christians in Corinth I may excel in it.

Amen

2 Corinthians 9:15

'Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift'

A gift with a fee attached is not a gift. A gift is something that is given freely, of which no payment need be made, otherwise it cannot be called a gift. Jesus was God's free gift of grace to humanity. His free, indescribable gift was given without any strings attached. God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son. His love for humankind is the source of the gift: the gift is the expression of that love. We are all sinners, yet God sent his precious Son to endure our penalty for us, fully satisfying God's wrath towards our iniquity. Jesus offers us complete forgiveness and eternal life.

The fact that Jesus died in my place is unfathomable. What a gift! I, like every other human on earth, am a sinner; but I have also been a target of sin. My childhood was an abusive one and as a result, I found myself being tossed around the care system as a teen. It has been through God's gift of grace that I have been able to forgive my abusers, heal from my brokenness and emerge unspoiled by my experiences. Once the work of healing had been given the opportunity of time and compassionate understanding, forgiveness arose not as a superficial act, but as a renewed and constructive way of life.

God's precious gift has also afforded me a fresh perspective. Looking at the world through the lens of God's abundant generosity, I am able to marvel at the beauty and wonder of His creation. Recently, I have taken up gardening. I live in a flat and outside space is limited. I have, however, filled that small space with clay pots of various sizes, bursting with an array of vibrant plants and flowers. There's something rather rewarding about watching tiny seeds that you have planted with your own hands grow deep roots and spring to life; in much the same way that God delights in His children.

As members of His church, God has given us a community to offer support. Asking for help can be difficult but it is in our vulnerability that we bless others with the opportunity to care and to give. I believe we can be Jesus to each other and an example of God's love and generosity to those who do not yet know Him. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

2 Corinthians 8:10-15

The grace of Jesus meant that he was rich and became poor

As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold last year, foodbanks in the UK reported demand tripling as coronavirus lockdown threw millions out of work. The public response was impressive, with nearly a million people volunteering to help the NHS and their local support centres. Such a surge in generosity may well have led us to hope that the pandemic signalled a transition to a kinder society that looks out for one another. A society that aims to “level the playing fields,” when providence gives more of the good things in life to some, and less to others.

Sadly, evidence from food banks indicates that food poverty continues to afflict vulnerable families, but the initial public generosity during the Covid-19 crisis was exceptional and will not become the “new normal.”

In today’s reading, Paul’s reminds us that it is the will of God that by mutually supplying one another, there should be some sort of equality. But more than this, Paul’s advice to the Corinthian church is this. What we start we should finish. It is a message as straightforward and relevant today as it was then.

Paul writes to the believers in Corinth about their earlier intentions to participate in the collection for churches in Judea during the previous year. They seem however to have become side-tracked. Paul reminds them, and us, of the need to carry through on our commitments as other people are counting on us.

All too often in life, there is a gulf between expressing an interest in something and actually doing something about it. Sometimes it’s easier, if for instance there is an initial tidal wave of interest as in the case of foodbanks last year. But what happens when everyday life takes over again yet the need for support continues? Surely generosity should be a way of life, not a one-off event, or something we do until the novelty wears off.

Obviously, there are many situations in which circumstances change or other priorities take precedence and we need to adjust our commitments. This is why Paul adds that gifts should be according to means. He wants to assure the Christian Corinthians that no one will hold them accountable for what they don’t have. They need to be concerned only with what they do have, and tailor their efforts according to that. It can be all too tempting to let the modesty of our talents, time, or resources intimidate us so that we stop doing something, be it a regular trip to the foodbank, or a regular phone call to someone we know is lonely. Worse still that it should prevent us ever starting in the first place, as in the case of the Corinthians!

Initial good intentions or short-term bursts of generosity then are like buds on a tree. They are pleasant to behold and give hope of good fruit. But without timely action, ongoing attention, or regular commitment, they can be lost. Beyond this, if we do not fulfil ordinary commitments at work, or if our generosity lapses when a need clearly persists, how can our words or actions possibly convince people that our God will fulfil his promise of eternal life?

2 Corinthians 9:1-6

Sow generously, reap generously

Well, we all know how this works don't we? We reap what we sow, what goes round, comes round, simple – you give generously to the local Church, you lend someone your lawnmower, you are generous, then in return you receive a generous pay rise, a promotion at work. Well, we know at least that we would want it to be like that anyway. But it is of course the opposite way round. We are forgiven and loved by God, and out of that received love we give, we are generous, we hold on lightly to that which we have received as we prefer others to ourselves in love. Then we see the fruit of our sowing, we reap what we have sown.

This is our calling to show God at work in and through us. I can't help but wrap everything Paul has to say in his letters around his experience of his personal imprisonment.

As a Prison Chaplain, when I speak to people from outside of the prison system it has often felt like we are knocking down the walls of stigma from around the prison, and that we are opening up people's understanding of what it really means to be generous without walls, without stigma, without judgment, without agenda or anything – just give. Give time, resources, money, a pair of trainers for a guy released homeless, a smile, just a smile! Or maybe, just maybe give them a second chance.

In the last couple of years, I have begun to feel like the prison is noticed and not just that huge wall that we all drive past – Jesus's presence is often tangible in there and his support through so many different generous agencies, Churches and individuals is becoming tangible from outside – we thank you!

We have a generous God who gives gifts freely to his children and we are called to pass it on, give it away, disseminate this, not to hold on to it or to consume it – let others know this generosity as we witness to the love of Christ in and through our actions.

The catch phrase 'the common good' has become politicized in recent years as well as adopted by the Church in some quarters. In principle it is a central Christian message – please let us continue with this demand on ourselves and work towards 'the common good' actually becoming common, actually becoming the norm. It seems a logical step that if we sow and be generous to those around us, including those over that high wall, that we would see people set free in so many ways, and society gains as the ripple effect of good takes over the ripple effect of crimes committed.

Paul also writes to the Church in Galatia to encourage sowing and reaping and ends the passage there with: 'So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all' (Gal 6:10).

Let us go and do likewise.

2 Corinthians 9:7

God loves a cheerful giver

Going to get my first Covid vaccination, I lost count of the number of volunteer stewards, who, on the face of it, were each simply standing around in a car park or corridor, ushering people the right way. For hours. And they were so cheerful! They were doing far more than just finding something to do, of course, because each one was contributing to the effectiveness of the NHS mission to protect the health and wellbeing of thousands (even millions) of people, most of whom they could never know.

When we give of our time and our money to the church, we know they are needed for the mission of Jesus and we recognise that doing so is an important part of our discipleship. We even acknowledge that, following the example of Jesus, we are to give of ourselves sacrificially, but – let's be honest – knowing what we ought to do and being cheerful about it isn't always the same thing. Especially, perhaps, when an evening church meeting beckons after a long and tiring day's work, or you hear for the nth time yet another appeal for fundraising. And raising the money for our own local needs and outreach sometimes seems hard enough, let alone trying to support mission in other places.

The idea of "giving without counting the cost" is an ancient characteristic of God's chosen people. Paul's words to the Corinthians echo the instruction in Deuteronomy 15:10 "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake." (NRSVA)

Chosen and called by name, healed and loved into God's abundant and hope-filled life, we are personally and endlessly blessed by God without ever earning it. So, then it's for each of us to decide - not whether but how we gladly say thank you for this indescribable gift. It's not a competition with anyone else: it's an individual decision in response to God, but it has an impact on the wellbeing of the whole body of Christ, from which we in turn receive blessing again...

We have the best reasons to be cheerful givers: it is first and foremost a heartfelt expression of personal thanks to God, and as a response to individual blessing it is also a means of bringing blessing to others, helping to fulfil God's will that all may be drawn into God's kingdom. On those occasions when weariness creeps in, why not pray this prayer of St Ignatius of Loyola:

*Teach us, good Lord,
to serve you as you deserve;
to give and not to count the cost;
to fight and not to heed the wounds;
to toil, and not to seek for rest;
to labour, and not to ask for any reward -
save that of knowing that we do your will.*

Amen.

2 Corinthians 9:8-9

Abundant blessings through giving

I have four nieces and two nephews. Sometimes, when I think about giving, they come to mind. I think of the times two of my nieces who are sisters have been given a piece of cake or some sweets at a family gathering. Initially they're often keen to keep it to themselves. But then they'll come into the room full of people and one of them might start to share the sweets out. As soon as the other sees them doing it (and, no doubt, the praise they receive for it) they immediately want to imitate them, they begin going round giving out their sweets with glee too.

I don't know about you, but often when it comes to generosity, I have the same initial reluctance to share. Passages like this though remind me of God's call to generosity. Not out of some kind of obligation or attempt to out-compete those around me. Rather, it is, at least in part, out of my desire to become more like the God whose generosity not only set me free but continues to abound and provide for me.

As disciples we find ourselves in this beautiful cycle of generosity. It's a cycle propelled by love, which is both framed by and re-frames our posture to God. The cycle starts with God's endless generosity to us, in Jesus, through his Spirit and in his daily provision. This in-turn reframes and re-orientates our hearts towards him, towards living in his love, his hopes, his desires. Which ignites generosity in our own hearts, giving back to him in service of him and others, finances and worship.

While this can be easy to say in a reflection, in practice it can feel more difficult. We can find ourselves at times struggling to see God's provision in our budgets, or relationships, or pain. The story of the Bible and of Christians throughout history is that God is with us in these moments even when it can be hard to see. For me these are moments when I remind myself of how God has been at work in the past and go back to basics. I remind myself of God's generosity in each breath, the generosity of his forgiveness and his presence. It's as I do this that my heart begins to be reframed again by his generosity and love.

Paul quotes from Psalm 112:9. The Psalmist speaks about the blessings of the Lord on those who fear him. In verse 7b-8a, just before this quotation they say 'Their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Their hearts are secure, they have no fear'. It is out of this heart posture, one which trusts in the Lord to provide, that we give.

2 Corinthians 9:10-11

Generous in every way

A few years ago, I had the privilege to travel to Uganda to experience some of the work being carried out by a charity amongst children in the slums. One day, a couple of us went to visit a school. The children there had virtually nothing – most of them had only meal a day – and their homes were little more than shacks. As visitors, they wanted to provide with us refreshments and stories – and so we drank bottles of coke and ate bananas while they sang and spoke with us about how much God meant to them and how they loved to draw close to Jesus. At first, we were embarrassed to eat and drink in front of them, when they had nothing, but we soon realised that the giving of hospitality was so important to them and our receiving that graciously was a gift to them. But it soon dawned on us that the greatest generosity we received that day was the insight into the deep faith and joy they had in Jesus. They literally sang about it!

Paul is reminding his readers that God does a work in us that means that generosity becomes natural and instinctive to us. It becomes part of who we are. And that was clearly evident in the streets of Kampala.

Mother Teresa said this in her Nobel peace prize speech:

‘It is a gift of God to us to be able to share our love with others’

She knew that it was God who empowered her to live a life of generosity where she no longer needed to think about what to do – it came naturally to her. And the stories of her life bring testimony to that.

For me, this is both a comfort and a challenge! The comfort is that God will do a work in me. The challenge is to let him! How do I let go and let God work in me? How do I give freely of my time, so that I am instinctively with the people that God wants me to be with? How do I share what I have received with others? How do I imitate the life of Jesus who demonstrated the generosity of God in everything he did?

First in gratitude – recognising all that I have from God and giving thanks

Second in prayer – seeking the work of Spirit in my life

You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, says Paul – let’s take that as a promise for our lives today.

2 Corinthians 9:12-14

Generosity is an overflow of thanks to God

Pentecost 2014 will always go down in my memory as the day we broke a baptism pool. It was a sunny day, and we were celebrating an outdoor service with baptisms. Some screws were missing, and it was just a bit too much for the pool to handle. It's amazing how much water can flood out of a pool that size. (It's less amazing if you're trying to empty one with buckets but that's another story).

Overflowing is a word used so often to describe the abundance of God and all that he gives us. I'm not sure it's something we immediately jump to when we are thinking of our own response. But maybe we should. What would it look like if our giving could be described as an overflowing expression of thanks?

The collection being offered for the Lord's people is a service for those in need and a service to God. In church, we talk a fair amount about liturgy. We have trained ourselves to respond almost without thinking when someone says "Lord, in your mercy" with "hear our prayer". Liturgy is quite simply, the work of the people. In the original language, it was all about offering a public service which wealthy individuals might do through giving large sums of money. What would happen if we thought of giving as a key part of our worship? As a natural response, as natural as some of the words of our liturgy have become.

Personally, I find it far too easy to make excuses why not to be generous. Usually, it's fairly inconvenient. It means going out of my way, maybe doing without something I'd quite enjoy. But if our generosity becomes unthinking, a knee-jerk reaction, maybe we can cut out the middleman, the inside voice of doubt, and the reasons why it might not actually happen in practice.

What's more, our giving can create connection and unity. In their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you. Being generous creates a link with other people, maybe other brothers and sisters in Christ that's hard to break. We suddenly start to care about things beyond our own walls, beyond our own lives. I know that I've never forgotten those who have been generous towards me.

But more than that, when we demonstrate an abundance of generosity, other people will be inspired to praise God. When we choose to give sacrificially, people start to ask why. What might change if we looked at our giving from a new mindset – if we were to see generosity as a radical act of the Kingdom of God? If we considered our giving as mission? A way in which we can embody the good news of the Gospel in our daily lives. Maybe then we can see the grace of God overflowing from one life to another, just like the water pouring out from a pool which simply can't contain it anymore.

2 Corinthians 9:15

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift”

St. Augustine wrote in City of God, “God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.” Perhaps our heads are also too: full of words, of descriptions?

Do you know that frustrating feeling when a word just feels out of grasp? It’s on the tip of your tongue but you just can’t bring it to mind and a million other words seem to appear instead?

In my family, and I’m sure in many others too, we use some strange made-up words to describe everyday items when the actual word just feels a little out of reach. My husband’s parents call the cash machine ‘the dibdib’, while my grandmother has always made it clear what she wants, be it the tv remote, a cooking utensil or the newspaper, when referring to it (or any other noun) as ‘the doings’.

But what happens when we don’t have the words at all? There is a difference between knowing the word and not being able to find it, and knowing a thing as true in your heart, but not having words to express it.

So often when talking about our Christian faith, we rely on phrases that do not fully explain what we mean: ‘mystery of the incarnation’, ‘the peace of God which passes all understanding’, ‘great is the mystery of faith’, for example.

We can grow in understanding of God through teaching and learning or by reflection, but there are some things that will always remain a state of mystery until, as Paul prays for the Colossian church in chapter 2 verse 3, we may ‘have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’.

How can we respond to God’s generosity to us, which surpasses description, when we only have things, we know the words for: acts of worship, and gifts of money, time, talents? How can our physical offerings compare, when that gift he made for us in the body of Christ is beyond the world of words? It is easy to feel like our giving in response to God’s generosity is trivial by comparison. When we give to God, in thanksgiving, we are still in that world of earthly gifts – but we must trust that God can see in our hearts what that gift or offering or sacrifice – be it a gift of money, of time or of talents, means to us.

When we accept that, and respond with our hearts, knowing that God alone can see that which we can’t explain, our gifts of physical things in the world of words, are joined with that indescribable aspect of faith and are transformed by it, as we ourselves are transformed by God’s abundant grace.

It matters what we give, and what we give matters to God, even if we can’t find the words to talk about it.

2 Corinthians 10:1-8

Obedience in Christ

When I moved to Oxford to begin training for ordination, I would have to walk up from my student halls into the city to go shopping. As this new route started to become familiar to me, there was something else new and unfamiliar that I had to face. The walk into the city would take me past a number of people for whom the streets were their home – tents set up on the side of pavements; duvets and rucksacks piled up in numerous empty shop doorways; placards and signs asking for money and food and behind each one, a person.

The rawness and reality of so many living on the streets, grated sharply against the wealth and academia Oxford is renowned for.

It deeply saddened and challenged me, and a battle raged within my mind.

What is the most helpful thing I can give - money, prayer, food, time? Should I give to one or all? Can I afford to give as a student? What would Jesus do?

Some of our greatest moments of conflict and battle, occur in our own minds. When I am feeling challenged or compelled towards generosity, any internal resistance towards it, usually comes from my head rather than my heart.

Paul, in this passage, tells us to take captive our thoughts and make them obedient to Christ. Yet, taking captive our thoughts, may feel more like trying to hold back a runaway train. Our thoughts lead to our feelings, our beliefs and our actions – maybe this is why Paul compels us to take them captive and obedient to Christ, because they hold such an influence over the rest of our lives. What we think, so often ends up becoming part of who we are.

We may flit between controlling our thoughts, or our thoughts controlling us. But Paul compels us to an alternative, where our thoughts become obedient to God's control – 'take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ'. This isn't an obedience rooted in religious law, but obedience that comes from devotion. When we encounter God's overwhelming love and generosity for us, we cannot help but be generous towards others. As God's nature towards us, is of overwhelming, abundant generosity, so our nature is transformed to be the same, as our thoughts and minds live in obedience to Christ.

If we desire to become a more generous people, it may not be what we do that needs to change, but how we think. A generous life requires a generous mindset, where God's thoughts become our thoughts.

So, let's take up Paul's challenge to bring our thoughts under God's control, and see how this transforms our lives in living generously.

2 Corinthians 10:9-18

Boasting in God

When we do something well, we want to tell others and be recognised. This is completely emphasised by the social media world we live in. Wherever we look on social media, the world revolves around the recognition of me and I – as a society, our currency has become ‘likes’ and ‘retweets’. This is not to say that all social media is bad – it can be a great source of hope, connection and communication, especially over the last 18 months. But in many cases social media magnifies pride, and the willingness to show off and to express the celebration of ‘me’ culture.

But Paul suggests that it is much better is it to seek the praise of God rather than other people. “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord, for it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one who the Lord commends.” We should not revel in the praise we receive from other people or the praise we give ourselves – but continually seek God’s praise and commendation.

Then when we receive praise, we will be tuned into God, and immediately understand why and how to give God the credit, because of what he has given us.

And that really is the main point. God has given us everything we have, our gifts, our talents, our wealth and possessions. So, what right do we have in boasting about any of these? Our ‘me culture’ society tell us that what we have generated and cultivated ourselves should be ring-fenced, hoarded, but in the same breath shown off in front of people and flouted, creating contrast, difference, jealousy and pride.

It is our role, in living in unison with God, to measure ourselves against only one yardstick: Jesus Christ. Jesus gave everything because he understood and preached the truth that everything comes from God. If we truly grasp that everything we are, have and inherit comes from God, we can abound in living a life as close to Jesus as we can; striving to approve ourselves to God and only him, not our Instagram followers.

How does this affect our approach generosity? Let’s try and shake the shackles loose. Let’s uncap our giving, strip away the limits to offering our gifts and talents; let’s look to give everything we can and boast in he who gave it to us first.

This week, why not try looking at a time where you might usually feel a sense of pride, as an opportunity to promote God’s glory and revel in what he has done for you.

2 Corinthians 13:5-8

Testing our faith, seeking truth

My kitchen window is fantastic for people watching, and as the kitchen table is my favoured location for working from home, I often find myself distracted by activity in the street outside. Occasionally I'll notice something unusual or interesting and will end up watching for a while and trying to work out what is going on.

Today's passage is Paul's response to a similar inquisition from some members of the Corinthian church who were questioning what Paul was up to, and whether his motives were pure.

They were not entirely wrong to do this, for there is a value in checking that the teaching we receive is consistent with the word of God – Jesus himself warned us about false teachers. But Paul is challenging us to examine ourselves with greater scrutiny still; checking that our motives are pure and that our eyes are fixed on Jesus.

What's really important is what we are up to. Should I really be sitting at the kitchen window wondering about what my neighbours are doing, whilst cookies burn in the oven and I neglect the email I need to reply to?

I have very little power to change what I perceive to be going on in the street outside, but I do have the opportunity to work hard at my job, to remember to take the cookies out of the oven and to reply to that message from a friend who is struggling... I can do my best to respond with a Christ-like attitude to the situation in front of me. We may not be able to change the motives and attitudes of others, but we can do something about our own, and Paul's invitation to us today, is to examine our personal response to the indescribable gift that God has so generously given to us.

Perhaps my attitude to time needs some attention, and I could work on prioritising my relationship with God over watching an extra episode of that series I've been binge-watching.

Perhaps I can reassign some of my energy into supporting a friend who really needs to know the love of God and might just find it through me.

Perhaps I need to consider whether I really need all of the resources I have, and how they could be better used to serve the Kingdom of God.

In the familiar words of Psalm 139, David invites God into this process, and I would encourage us all to do the same; *"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."* Psalm 139:23-24

2 Corinthians 9:15

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift”

At first glance this verse can mean so many things; is Paul talking about Jesus as God’s gift to us, eternal life? Or could it be something more practical that we should give thanks for?

It prompted me to look at the context of Paul’s writing in these chapters. He is involved in discussions about the Christian duty to provide financial support for Christians in Jerusalem who were facing economic hardship because of the famine in the 40s in the first century. So, this may be one of the earliest church fundraisers ever!?

At that time, it was certainly a new concept for Christians to raise money for others who did not live in the local vicinity. So, with that as a backdrop, what could verse 9:15 be really saying to us?
I have chosen to break the quote down:

“Thanks be to God...” – we are used to hearing an offering of thanks, so this is quite commonplace, but what follows next is a little more unusual...

“...for his indescribable...” – ok, well this is certainly not a common turn of phrase. What could indescribable really encompass? It seems to point towards no wording being adequate to describe the gift that God has bestowed upon us.

“...gift” – So, it could be Jesus Christ, who is the gift of God. Maybe, it could also be: The Holy Spirit, the Gospels, blessings from God, the forgiveness of sin, or the love of God?? It could be everything and all of these things. Either way, giving thanks for God’s gift(s) is a call to arms...

So, we must give thanks for a special gift from God. Paul is calling out to us using language to inspire and challenge, and it is set amidst a context of being generous to others.

But how do we respond to this though? If the gift from God is indescribable or unspeakable, how can we muster ourselves?

For me, the language used here is quite radical, as are the wider efforts to encourage early Christians to fundraise and support others in need. What could a radical response from us be to this quotation? What could radical generosity look like; generosity which words and convention struggle to describe?

In our modern day lives we like to be safe and secure and are encouraged by the material world to live a life where we accumulate wealth and possessions. Is there an incompatibility between radical generosity in the face of God’s gift to us and how we tend towards accumulation? Is our take on radical generosity measured and controlled rather than unconditional giving? Do we seek to work towards a 10% of disposable income figure in our heads irrespective of what the need itself may be? Do we see ourselves as being independent in our faith communities; has our society bred into us a culture of independence as opposed to being members of a faith community whereby we can be inter-dependent on one another as fellow Christians who should involve ourselves collectively in God’s earthly mission? For me, this quote speaks about being thankful for the gifts and blessings God has bestowed upon us and seeing it as a miraculous provision, which we in turn should reciprocate in kind as Christian disciples too.

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

Encourage one another and be of one mind

For Paul, the end of a letter is never the end of the issue. It's the beginning of the solution. This letter ends with a five-fold call to action. Financial need in the church is a fact of life. It's normal. And the solution has always been the same: the active work of the Holy Spirit in shared life of God's people.

‘¹¹Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.’

The word finally here is actually a bit too... final. It's not so much the “and finally” of a long, dry sermon; it's much more of a call to action, an encouragement, a challenge: like the words “just do it” at the end of a Nike advert. Something like “going forward”, or “from here onwards”, “from now on”. From now on what? From now on aim for joy, renewed purpose, mutual encouragement, togetherness and peace. These are the hallmarks of a healthy church family in all places and in every age.

The first is joy. The church is to be a joyful family. “Brothers and sisters, rejoice!”. This is more of a word of blessing than a word of command. It carries overtones health, gladness, friendship, goodwill and celebration. Things which foster happy, healthy relationships. Things which foster joy and laughter and generosity.

The second is restoration. The church is to be a restorative community. “Strive for full restoration”. The Repair Shop is a wonderful TV programme in which meaningful objects - damaged, neglected and broken - are restored to their former glory. The stories of these objects and their owners touches something deep within us. And so, it is with the church. We should strive to be a community in which damaged, broken and neglected people can find healing and full restoration. The third is encouragement. We are to “encourage one another”. This isn't about the brave among us putting courage into fearful, like siphoning fuel from one car to another. No, it's about a community of equally faint-hearted and fearful believers gently calling courage out from one another. Calling one another to be filled with courage by the God of all comfort.

The fourth is togetherness. “Be of one mind”. Not the oneness of uniformity; the lockstep marching of disciplined soldiers. No. This is the oneness of family; the comfortable togetherness, security and love of a wholesome family; a family of unique and gifted individuals bound together not by duty, but by the love of God.

The fifth and the last is peace. “Live in peace”. Not the false peace of keeping your mouth shut or not rocking the boat. The peace of Christ, the author of peace. The peace which comes to us in the presence of Jesus. The peace which transforms, reconciles and brings spiritual blessing to the life of the church. A joy filled, restorative, courageous, unified, peace-loving church cannot fail to be a generous church. Financial need in the church is a normal fact of life. And the solution - as always - is the work of the Holy Spirit in shared life of God's people.

Thank you for journeying with us through the month of June as we reflect and focus on how we can be more generous.

We'd love to know how this series may have changed or developed your thinking towards generosity. Sharing your stories can help to build up and encourage those around you.

Please feel free to contact the team at www.generousjune.co.uk/contact/.

We'd love to hear from you.

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