

LUKE 12:32-40

Is there anything more frustrating than giving someone a present and being told “oh, you shouldn’t have?”

There’s not much really that you can say other than, “of course I should”. Which is worse? To turn up with nothing, to turn up with an offering that disappears unnoticed into the heat of the preparations and the meal to come, or to overdo it and take an entire case of wine to a simple supper party?

The giving and receiving of gifts is a fraught business.

Suppose a very large supermarket were to open the doors and say “here, take 1p and buy everything you need. And this is forever; the supermarket will be open every day. If you haven’t got any money, take what you need.”

What would happen? Everyone would come and just take what they needed for the day. Of course they would. More likely, there would be something like the first day of the IKEA sale and the police would be called before someone was crushed to death. I wonder how long it would be before people came to realise there would always be enough? And this is for food, which OK, we all need, but it goes off and is spoilt and as we hear on the news, people throw away tons of food every week from not buying what they need but what they want, or cleaning up on all the 2for1 offers. It’s really hard standing in front of a counter filled with 2for1 kilo bags of out of season clementines and saying: I don’t want two. I don’t need two. I shall take one. Mind you, I don’t know who’s not using the food I don’t throw away. In my house, the fridge is a waste land by Thursday.

It’s easy to blame the supermarkets, but who is it who takes the stuff? It’s us. I must be the only person in the world who doesn’t blame the bankers for the financial crisis. I blame us. We were the ones with credit accounts, we bought the stuff; we knew perfectly well that it was unrealistic to expect to pay back thousands of pounds worth of debt on credit cards from a salary of not much more per annum. Now they want it back. We are now in the position that to be countercultural, you don’t need to go to church, because it’s OK to be spiritual, to be countercultural you have to cut up your credit cards. Did I hear a sharp intake of breath?

Where was I with the gospel?

We acknowledge as Christians that all of the world and indeed our own existence is a gift from God. The difficulty lies in reciprocity. What can we do in return? Agnostics and atheists in particular struggle with this, since it’s about worship. A gift system based on reward for services rendered in other words, worship God and God might give you good things, sticks in their throats. And so it should, because it’s wrong. We know that some people simply do not receive the good things in life for any reason that is apparent to any of us and some of them believe in God. Some others did believe in God until bad things happened to them.

God quite simply, gives, as Jesus says it is his pleasure to give us the Kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom which begins here on earth and continues for eternity. The prophet Isaiah tells us: *everyone who thirst, come to the waters and you that have no money, come buy and eat. Come; buy wine and milk without money and without price.*

This is one up on the supermarkets. This is the biggest shop in the world full of everything you could ever possibly want and all you need to do to receive is to be hungry and thirsty. You don’t need money, not even a single penny.

So when Jesus says, don't store up things on earth, it's not only that we have more than we need and others have less, although that is important, it's that thinking about what we have means we are not thinking about God.

In one of the Harry Potter books, Harry, who has just seen a friend killed by the evil Voldemort, is in his head teacher's office. Albus Dumbledore watches as Harry, angry and upset and needing to show he wanted attention picks up various of the beautiful astronomical and magical instruments that are in the office and smashes them. Dumbledore simply invites him to keep on smashing them since he doubtless has too many possessions and waits for him to stop. Of course, Harry stops, it's no fun smashing things with permission. And he found he had Dumbledore's attention whether he smashed things or not. We spend a lot of time trying to attract attention by accumulating possessions. We accumulate with the world's permission, goods are what make up important and noticed in the eyes of the world. God offers a choice to stop doing it and stop being weighed down by what we have. Instead he says we can instead be unnoticed, be counted as nothing, be humble and serve others, like the master who came home and found his servants waiting for him.

You might say, where's the fun in that? Who wants to be unnoticed? God says, there's nothing in this world which is actually worth having, unless God is present. People die, metal rusts, possessions decay. Soon we shall all be forgotten by everyone. But not by God, unless we choose to be forgotten for the sake of a change of clothes and a visit to the supermarket. It's no good saying to God, "oh no, you shouldn't have," because this is how God is. He does not need anything. There is nothing we can do in the reciprocity stakes that has any impact on him.

What we can do is be more like him and that means giving. We become more like God when we give. We can give our giving, if you follow me. It all forms a virtuous circle. We give, we become more like God, so we give more, we become more like God...

This is why we worship. We give it, not because it is demanded but because it's a way of loving. It's not because we are worth it, as it says in the advertisements, because we are not, or because God is worth it, because God is beyond measuring in any way at all, but because by recognising the importance of love and being ready, we will see the Kingdom of God when it comes.

Rev. Caroline Ralph
8.8.10