



## **Diocese of Portsmouth – “Stewardship for Sundays”**

As every member of the Church of England will know, the past decade has seen a dramatic change in the way the Church is financed, placing a much greater burden on parishes. Obviously, this has been a cause of some concern, though it is worth remembering that almost every other denomination operates under similar conditions.

Perhaps it is something to do with the English temperament that makes many clergy and readers feel awkward about discussing money, especially from the pulpit. The old model of a centrally funded Church meant that this topic could generally be ignored; but that is no longer possible. Of course, the Bible – and Jesus especially - has a lot to say about what we should, and should not, do with our wealth. It is clear that stewardship is central to discipleship - indeed the cynic might even say that it is the final test of our Christian commitment. More positively, Christian giving is part of our recognition that everything we enjoy, even life itself, is a gift from God.

Therefore, I am pleased to introduce this pack of sermon notes. It is offered in the hope that it will stimulate a regular and serious engagement with what the Bible says about the use of our financial and material resources. Ideally, this will mean that preaching on stewardship becomes a regular feature of Church-life.

The Rt Revd Dr Kenneth Stevenson  
The Bishop of Portsmouth  
May 2005



## **DIOCESE OF PORTSMOUTH STEWARDSHIP FOR SUNDAYS**

We are grateful to Brian Morris for permission to reproduce these sermon notes, which come from a series of papers he issued in Gloucester Diocese over a three year period. You will find notes for most Sundays of the three year lectionary, except for the major festivals. Brian wrote these for specific dates between 2001 – 2004, and so any errors in allocating them to the Propers are entirely my fault. If you spot any please let me know! As Brian says below, the outlines are deliberately brief. You may wish to change one or two details, such as to substitute a nearby location where a West Country village is mentioned. You are free to adapt them as much as you wish!

There are three sections for years A, B & C, plus a separate section for saint's days etc. when the readings are the same for each year.

I hope you will find these outlines helpful to promote Christian Stewardship in our parishes.

**Gordon Uphill,**  
*Parish Resources Adviser.*  
**May 2005**

*Extract from the preface to the first sermon notes issued in 2001:-*

"Do you want any special lessons?" I'm often asked when invited to preach on Stewardship. I prefer to stick to the normal lectionary, whenever possible. Christian Stewardship isn't some kind of 'bolt-on' extra, it is, or at least it should be, a normal part of the life of the church.

At the last meeting of the Advisory Council for Parish resources, it was suggested that it might be useful to provide sermon outlines to help clergy preach on Christian Stewardship. This is, therefore, the first of what it is hoped will become a series of 'occasional papers', linking the Common Worship Eucharistic lectionary with the themes of stewardship.

Not every occasion is suitable for preaching on this theme, of course, but the lectionary for ordinary time offers many opportunities. With a little imagination, it is possible to relate each Sunday to some aspect of Christian Stewardship.

The outlines are deliberately brief – suggestions for reaching a target, with an illustration or two to get the point across. There is plenty of scope for incorporating other material. Think of it as a quarry; sort through it, throw away the waste, and keep what you think will be helpful in your particular circumstances.

**Brian Morris,**  
*Stewardship Officer*  
**Diocese of Gloucester**

# YEAR A

## **A - First Sunday in Advent**

A lady returned home to find her husband, a professor of linguistics, in bed with one of his students. 'Well', she exclaimed, 'I am surprised!' 'No', he replied; 'we are surprised. You are astonished!'

The events to which Jesus points his disciples in today's Gospel, using the conventional formulae of his day, will, he says, leave most people both surprised and astonished. In a world where there seems to be little evidence of God's activity, where evil seems often to be unopposed, where scientific thought and post-modernist philosophy appear to reduce God to the margins of society, apocalyptic language rings false. And, all too often, it is seen as a kind of veiled threat; 'Just you wait! Prepare to meet your doom!'

Paul calls on the Christians in Rome to live as though that day has come. They are to surprise and astonish their neighbours by the quality of their lives, as they exercise their stewardship of the Gospel. In a society which, in many ways resembles our own, with its mixture of credulous fatalism and sophisticated cynicism, they are proclaim that, in the new life they have been given in Christ, they find a purpose and direction which affects every activity they undertake.

## **A - Second Sunday in Advent**

In my home area, there is a saying, 'If all else fails, read the instructions.' Unfortunately, as anyone who has ever bought an item of self-assembly furniture will know, the instructions aren't always clear! How many of us depend on our children, or grandchildren, to programme the video, or show us how to use the new digital camera?

Anyone who reads the Bible as a simple set of instructions faces the same problem. It's not just that dietary and social customs from 3,000 years ago don't necessarily fit with our contemporary society. It's that the underlying principles clash. 'Preparing the way for the Lord' presupposes that we know what kind of lord we are anticipating; both President Bush and the Taliban could, presumably, claim to be engaged in their own version of this task, but by very different processes, and with very different outcomes.

We need to read the Bible, not as book of answers, but as a book of questions. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' 'What is truth?' 'What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?' 'Where can I go from your Spirit?'

Our approach to Christian stewardship is one part of our answer to those questions. It is part of how we work out the implications of the Gospel in our own lifestyle; in the way we use all that God has given us.

## **A - Third Sunday in Advent**

'If Christians expect us to believe in a redeemer, they might try to look a little more redeemed!' someone once remarked.

'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?' In response to the question of the disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus does not give a direct answer. Instead, he points to the evidence of his presence. Where he is, the kingdom is. In his presence, lives are transformed. And for those whose preconceptions blind them to this new reality, there will always be the possibility of misunderstanding.

Perhaps one reason why some people view Christian stewardship with suspicion is because, if taken seriously, it goes to the root of the decisions we make about our lifestyle – about we reveal ourselves as 'the redeemed'. It is more than two centuries since, in revolutionary France, the question was posed, 'You call yourself a Christian. In what ways are you distinguishable from a pagan?' The Epistle of James, part of which we read this morning, picks up the same theme; how do we show ourselves to be the redeemed?

The answer must be that where we are, we carry Christ with us. And therefore, where we are, the values of his kingdom are embodied. It is by the use of our time, our skills and our money that, today, in Jesus' name, sight, healing, freedom and sound are restored to those whom society as a whole shows little concern for; just as it is by his grace that we ourselves are made whole.

## **A - Second Sunday of Epiphany**

Some people can be amazingly generous. Last month, outside farm in the north of Gloucestershire, I saw a sign by the gate. It read, 'Christmas turkeys and geese – bed and breakfast.' They must have been the most pampered animals in existence!

Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul reminds them of the generosity of God. 'You have been enriched in every way', he says. Through their faith in Christ, they have every spiritual gift they need.

This theme, of wealth and generosity, echoes through our Gospel. John's awareness of who Jesus is, is not kept to himself; it is shared with his disciples. Jesus responds to John's disciples' query with an invitation to take the first steps that will lead to their journey with him. Andrew picks up the thread; he shares his new discovery with his brother, Peter.

Are we, and is our church, a giver or a hoarder? Not just of money; but of time, of skills, of energy? And in particular, how do we use the imperatives we heard in today's Gospel; 'Look! Come and see!'

## **A - Third Sunday of Epiphany**

For Peter and Andrew, the time has come. Last week, we heard, in John's Gospel, how they first met Jesus. Now, weeks – perhaps months – later, that encounter reaches a new stage with the call, 'Follow me.'

The first, probably Jewish, readers of Matthew's Gospel, must have found these verses puzzling – which is perhaps why Matthew goes out of his way to tie in the Old Testament prophecies. For Jesus does everything backwards. On John the Baptist's imprisonment, he goes back to Galilee, a remote, obscure provincial area. He establishes himself, not in a Jewish town, but in the relatively cosmopolitan city of Capernaum, with a large gentile population. And it seems that his first disciples are fishermen – people who, because of the irregular hours their work imposed, were often regarded as 'sinners', people who did not keep the strict purity code of the Pharisees.

It seems that, right from the start of his ministry, Jesus is not concerned with 'doing it right' or with 'playing it safe'. Perhaps this is something we need to learn from him. In his parables, a steward is not someone who conserves what is entrusted to him; it is someone who 'plays the markets', who is prepared for risk and adventure – who lives, as Paul put it, by the folly of the cross. 'Penny wise, pound foolish', we say; could this apply to our faith?

## **A - Fourth Sunday of Epiphany**

The story is told of a group of travellers crossing a desert, who stopped to admire a wonderful palace set by a spring. A steward came out, and said, "My master bids you enter and refresh yourselves." They entered, and were amazed at the magnificence – the painting, the gold leaf, the inlaid marble floors. They were led to a room where their host, a man dressed in a blue robe, was administering medicines to a crowd of sick people. When his work was finished, he turned, and said, "Come; eat." And through an archway, they entered a hall where a feast was set before them, with choicest dishes and the best wines. After they had eaten, their host said, "Before you resume your journey, you may care to relax in my gardens." For beyond the hall, perfect gardens stretched as far as the eye could see.

As they strolled amid the fountains, one of the travellers said, "I fancy I have met our host before. Here, he must employ 500 gardeners; but when he was in my city, he was going from door to door, seeking work, however menial, and often finding none. I am sure he was one of those I employed as a gardener."

“Yes”, said another; “I thought he resembled a man who used to sleep at my door. In charity, I gave him work, repairing buildings on my farm. But I cannot understand how he has come to live in such magnificence.”

“He seemed familiar to me”, said a third. “I am a baker, and one very like him used to beg for bread in my town. At the end of each day, I gave him a loaf, if one was left.”

“I am sure that I know him, too”, a fourth said. “There was a leper in our village, to whom I gave healing ointment to soothe his sores. But how could he have been healed?”

They returned to the palace, and as their host bade them farewell, he said, “You have many questions which puzzle you. You may ask my steward; he will put your minds at rest.” At the gate, they asked if the man in blue had ever visited their towns.

“Yes”, replied the steward. “You saw him there, and you thought you served him. But in fact, you served yourselves. For without the ability to give, to share, not only would you not be able to enter this palace; you would not even be able to see it.” With those words, he closed the gate; and the palace vanished.

## ***A - Second Sunday before Lent***

‘What was there before creation?’ is a question that cannot be answered – not because we don’t know, but because it’s the wrong kind of question. It confuses ‘creation’ with ‘making’ – it’s the difference between reassembling matter into a new form, as we do when we make a cake, or a TV set, and when we create a symphony – which exists in the composer’s mind before it has any physical expression. Making depends on competence – you may be good cook or a bad cook, but without ingredients, no one will know which. Creation, on the other hand, depends on inspiration – which is why computers cannot write great music. They lack the ability to sense when rules need to be broken creatively.

Christian Stewardship shares something of the process of creation, insofar as it helps us learn the creative ‘breaking of rules’. The rules, in this case, are those of worldly prudence. ‘Seeking first God’s kingdom and his righteousness’, being free from the concerns which rule most people’s lives, because we have, as Paul put it, ‘the first fruits of the Spirit’ as the assurance of God’s love for us, has some surprising results.

Birds, and grasses, and flowers don’t worry, says Jesus. They simply are; their glory is in being what God created them to be. Human beings, on the other hand, spend so much of their time worrying about what they are to become – or what might possibly happen to them – that we often have no time to be. At the heart of stewardship is an affirmation of our potential; an affirmation which says that, as we place what we have and are in God’s hands, we find we become enriched by being free to be most fully ourselves, able to take our part in the dance of creation.

## ***A - The Sunday next before Lent***

‘The ways of Allah’, declares an Arab proverb, ‘are truly mysterious. He had the desert, yet he still created hell!’ Applying logic to our readings today is likely to lead to similar perplexity. They take us to the far limits of human experience, to a world which can only be expressed through image and metaphor.

Stories like these enable us to connect the mystery without with the mystery within. My awareness of myself, as in some way existing apart from the rest of creation, is linked with the existence of that creation. A few years ago, we sought to explain the nature of the universe; today, the question is, ‘Why should there be anything at all?’ Post-modernist philosophy has attempted to create a world without reference points; its social expression is a society in which people are fundamentally dissociated from themselves. They know, even if they do not express it, day by day, hour by hour, the hell of the inner desert.

‘Two, and two only, luminous and self-evident beings; myself and my creator’, wrote Newman. It is from this point that all Christian stewardship begins. We are primarily stewards, not of things, but of persons, of relationships. Our use, or abuse, of the material world, including money, is an expression of that web of relationships in which we share – including our

relationship with God himself.

Like Peter, James and John on the mountaintop, we don't always understand where we are or what we are doing at the time. All too often, like Peter, we seek to create permanence, stability, in some ideal moment.

'This is my Son, whom I love; ... Listen to him!' We can only do so if we are close enough to hear his voice; if we travel light as we follow him.

## **A - 1st Sunday in Lent**

'I always give in to temptation', wrote George Bernard Shaw, 'because I find that what is bad for me does not tempt me.' If only it were true! Seven weeks or so ago, many of us made New Year resolutions; I wonder how many are still being kept? Or are we more like the man who said giving up smoking was easy – he'd done it dozens of times!

Some people find it helpful to distinguish between doing wrong and being wrong. Who knows what would have happened if Adam and Eve had admitted their guilt? But we all know that, so very often doing wrong leads to being wrong. We search for reasons for acting as we did; we blame our environment, our education, or someone else. Adam blames Eve; Eve blames the serpent; and the serpent's 'he said that; but what did he mean?' is, quite literally, the oldest trick in the book!

Mark, in his account of the temptation, uses an interesting phrase. He says that Jesus 'was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.' It has been suggested that this represents the psychological truth that while we resist temptation, it remains fascinating, alluring, dangerous. It is when we admit the reality of what tempts us that it can be converted into a strength, because it loses its power over us. It becomes, not our master, but our servant. In Matthew's account of this event, we see something of the process by which Jesus achieved this, and presumably taught his disciples. It shows that sin, as Paul reminded the church at Rome, has to be worked for; but grace comes as a free gift!

## **A - 2nd Sunday in Lent**

"How do you make God laugh?" "Tell him your plans!" runs an old joke. When Abram collected his bus pass, he could never have even imagined the journey he would shortly be using it to make!

Nicodemus shows a similar degree of puzzlement in his encounter with Jesus in today's Gospel. 'Being born again' is something he takes at face value. His world-view is of a logical, linear progression, in which events move from A to B to C in an understandable pattern.

Grace, says Jesus, doesn't work like that. Its effects are surprising; as unpredictable as being born a second time. It follows the laws, not of logic, but of Love. Like the wind, it can be experienced, but never contained.

Christian Stewardship is our response to grace. It isn't a matter of needs or wants in the local church; it's a matter of our ability to let go, to live the life of the Spirit, to be free to live and work in the love of God. It enables us to join in the laughter of God at our everyday, cautious, reasonable human plans, and become a pilgrim people in search of his kingdom.

### **A – 3rd Sunday in Lent**

600 million years or so ago, our distant ancestors emerged from the sea, and water is still absolutely critical for our survival. A healthy person can go for days, even weeks, without eating; but 48 hours without water means serious problems for anyone. In the heat and aridity of the Middle East, this is even more true.

But water is not only the basis of life; it's the universal solvent. And so many barriers are broken, dissolved, in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, it is hard to know where to begin. A man addresses a woman; a Jew speaks to a Samaritan, and asks to share a flask of water; the religious traditions of almost a millennium are declared to be obsolete.

Christian Stewardship is about what we do with our liquid assets; the time, skills and money we can use in our lives. It's about how we can make ourselves oases from which others can draw refreshment.

## **A - 4th Sunday in Lent (Mothering Sunday)**

'Seeing is believing'. Except that all too often, witnesses of an event differ widely about what they have seen. We might equally well say, at times, 'believing is seeing'; our expectations can colour our vision to such an extent that we fail to see what is before us. When the first European explorers landed in Patagonia, they were worshipped as gods, because they arrived from the sea without any means of transport. Their boats were anchored a few hundred feet offshore, but the native Indians, unused to anything bigger than a dug-out canoe, were unable to 'see' them until they were rowed out and invited to touch the hulls. Only then were they able to see the ships.

Very often, the way we ask a question determines the answer we get. 'Tell me what's good about the life of this parish' or 'Tell me what you'd like to change about the life of this parish'; is the glass half full or half empty? Do we speak of giving 5%, or 10%, of our income to the local church, or of keeping 95%, or 90% for our own use? Our consumerist society makes strenuous efforts to get us to ask the 'right' questions, through advertising, and the work of those who mould public opinion. How many of them do we accept at face value?

'Live as children of light' wrote Paul to the church at Ephesus. Live as those who are, in the light of Christ, able to see beyond the assumptions which rule our everyday actions, and place them in the light of eternity. Live as those who know that they live in the sight of God, and whose lives reflect his love and generosity.

## **A - 5th Sunday in Lent**

This strange story which forms today's Gospel; so clearly a story of death and resurrection, yet told in a way that challenges all our assumptions. It's a story of immense power and drama; yet the other evangelists make no reference to it; if it were not for John's Gospel, the story of Lazarus would not have been told.

In this event, John takes all the platitudes with which we have surrounded Jesus in our attempts to reduce him to a figure we can understand, and strips them away. Here is the healer who refuses to heal; the teacher who is silent in tears; the leader who confuses and alienates his followers; the comforter of the sorrowful who is reproached for his lack of care and concern. Like the prophet Ezekiel, John takes us back to the bare bones of faith.

'Lazarus, come out!' Out of the authority of love, Jesus speaks. He calls Lazarus, as he calls us, not merely from physical death, but from all that up to this point has bound him, has made him stumble in his discipleship. 'Take off the graveclothes and let him go.' Lazarus is free to go his own way; from now on, it will always be in the life, the power and the love of Christ that he chooses his path.

Christian stewardship is about our part in this story; about the choices we make as we live in the love of Christ; about the way in which we choose a lifestyle that embodies the values of the Kingdom of God; about how we echo the words of Christ, and call others to share in the freedom we have been given.

## **Palm Sunday**

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

'I don't much care where –' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter much which way you go,' said the Cat."

If, on the other hand, you have a clear destination, your choice of route becomes restricted. Yes, you can go to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head; but it's only a sensible option from a very limited range of starting points!

The account of the Passion which forms today's Gospel is summarised by Paul using an early hymn in his letter to the Church at Philippi. He holds Christ up as the pattern for the life of every believer. If we are united with Christ in our baptism, if we share in his passion, our lives should have a very definite direction. It matters very much, says Paul, which way we go.

Christian Stewardship is about how we express that pattern, those choices. Do they

reflect a life of grasping or a life of giving? Do they display humility or self-assertion? Are we servants of others, or do we live for ourselves?

## **A - The Second Sunday of Easter**

Our sense of reality depends, ultimately, on our sense of touch, in spite of our apparent dependence on sight. The horror of a ghost story stems from the idea of something that can be seen, but not touched. We see this in the case of Thomas; for him, too, touching, not seeing, is believing.

Our Epistle reflects the same tension between an intangible hope and what many people would regard as the present reality. It is, says the author of 1 Peter, the fruit of our faith; 'Though you have not seen him, you love him.' It should be the presence, the touch on our lives of the unseen Jesus which is our motivation, not the 'changes and chances of this fleeting world'.

One test of how well we are 'in touch' is our attitude to those things which 'perish, even though refined by fire'. Do we give them their true value; or do we hoard them, rather than putting our trust in 'an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade'? Our time, our talents and our treasure all have their worth assessed in the light of the resurrection.

## **A - The Third Sunday of Easter**

"I didn't see you; the sun was in my eyes.' My friend, whose car was run into, was not impressed by the excuse – particularly as both drivers were heading due north! Perhaps Cleopas and his friend had more excuse; Emmaus lies almost due west of Jerusalem, and their journey took place late in the afternoon.

It must have been an exhausting weekend. To the normal Passover festival they had gone to celebrate had been added the events of Good Friday; and now there was this strange rumour they had heard only that Sunday morning from other disciples. No wonder their pace was slow enough for the figure striding down the same road to overtake them, greet them with the normal courtesy of the traveller, and join them for the few miles of their journey. No wonder, too, that they invited the stranger in, following the normal custom of hospitality, even in spite of his evident intention to continue his journey.

It is when we, too, invite Jesus in, when we recognise his presence, that we share in the Stewardship response of the disciples on that road. 'Were not our hearts burning within us?' is what stimulates them to invest their time and energy in retracing their steps to Jerusalem. There is no calculation here; no 'thought for tomorrow'; simply an overwhelming sense of the importance of the mission they have discovered and of their need to share.

All too often, we present Stewardship as a matter of need. Perhaps we should remember that Jesus is always ready to go further than we imagine our own journey will take us. We have to make time and space to recognise him before we can respond; and then, nothing will be able to hold us back.

## **A - The Fourth Sunday of Easter**

There can be problems to communal living. When my son was at university, he found his milk was constantly being 'borrowed' and not replaced. He never found who was responsible; but they stopped after he left a bottle in the fridge half filled with shampoo diluted to an appropriate consistency!

The experiment in the early church recorded in Acts doesn't seem to have lasted very long, or spread widely outside the Jerusalem church. Certainly Paul saw no incompatibility between his work as an apostle and earning his own living, and the churches of Macedonia and Corinth appear to have been made up of people with their own resources. But, as the writer of 1 Peter points out, this only increases the responsibility for each person to use their resources to show the validity of their faith by the spirit of generosity in which they support each other.

Our giving, of time, skills and money, should be measured, not by the needs of the local

church, but the needs of the whole of God's mission. 'Give all thou canst; high heaven rejects the lore / Of nicely calculated less or more.'

## **A - The Fifth Sunday of Easter**

Some people say that it is no coincidence that the first Christian martyr was a financial administrator!

Today's Epistle speaks of the church as made up of living stones. It's an expression that always rings bells with me, because I began my working life as a geologist. Every rock is marked by particular characteristics which are simultaneously its strength and its weakness. Granite, for example, has immense strength, but was quite difficult to cut into regular blocks before the invention of powered machinery. Sandstone is easily worked, but often crumbles as the atmosphere reacts with the iron holding it together – as many church architects know only too well! Immense thicknesses of mud are needed to build a wall; but bake the same clay into bricks, and you have a strong, simple building material. Slate is a good roofing material, but doesn't bear weight along its grain.

There are some stones, however, such a Portland stone, which are very versatile. They can be easily dressed; they can be carved into intricate shapes, and will take heavy loads in any direction. Such rocks are called, technically, 'freestones'.

The 'freestone' on which the Church is built is Jesus. He takes each of the 'living stones' which makes the superstructure, and uses it – uses us – in such a way that our strengths, rather than our weaknesses, are what contribute to his temple. In his economy, there is a vital rôle for each of us.

'You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it' says Jesus in our Gospel. Perhaps the most important prayer is that we may each discover our vocation, the part we are to play in the building of his church, so that we can exercise our stewardship, the use of our unique skills and abilities, effectively.

## **A - The Sixth Sunday of Easter**

Paradox is one of the classic sources of humour. It has the supreme advantage over other techniques when it comes to challenging assumptions. Shaw, in his play, 'St Joan', brings on a soldier who describes himself as 'A saint ... straight from hell.' He goes on to explain that he gets one day a year off for the solitary good deed committed by accident in an otherwise totally misspent life!

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments", said Jesus. It's a statement which underlies the paradox that lies at the heart of Christianity.

We usually think of 'commandments' in the sense of 'orders'. But this is far from the mind of Jesus. His commandments are quite simply a statement of 'how things are in the kingdom of God'. To be in God, to be in Love, is to be in a state where the world can only work this way, in order, ease and pleasure. Outside is a world of dis-order, dis-ease, displeasure.

Insofar as we live 'in Love', we know this life of heaven here and now. Insofar as we fail to do so, the kingdom of heaven is a long way off – or a hell of a long way off, to be more theologically accurate! Our Christian Stewardship – our attitude to 'the things of this world' – are in some sense a measure of the depth of our love for God.

## **A - The Seventh Sunday of Easter**

The Ascension is the last of Jesus' parables, and, like so many of them, it is an acted, rather than a spoken, parable. Sometimes, actions speak, if not louder, more clearly than words.

The Ascension echoes the words from the cross, "It is finished!" Finished, not in the sense of 'over', but 'completed'. But if 'Love's redeeming work is done', there is no place for Jesus on the earth. If he remains, he will become a mere wonder, a magical figure; the last temptation will have triumphed. The Church will become a place of slavery rather than freedom.

And so, in a form the disciples will be able to grasp, the Church is sent on its glorious, wobbly way into the freedom for which it was created; the freedom for which Jesus prayed for all his disciples down the ages.

But it's so easy to retreat from the, at times, frightening challenge of that freedom. Christian Stewardship constantly asks the question, 'Over how much of my life is Christ the Lord?' Does the way we live bring glory to Jesus, as he prayed? Or does it still proclaim the values of 'the world' to which we no longer belong?

Our Epistle today was probably written to a Church facing a new wave of persecution. There would have been the constant pressure to compromise, to play safe. The writer sees this as part of the baptismal life, and urges steadfastness and reliance on God in the face of difficulties and dangers. Glory, the glory which Jesus revealed, the glory which comes through those who join in his prayer, "All I have is yours, and all you have is mine" may take apparently strange forms. Our stewardship is an expression of our commitment to the crucified, risen and ascended Christ.

## **A - Pentecost**

"I've reached the age where people have stopped sending me birthday cards; they just send 'get well soon' cards!" a friend remarked recently. Sadly, some people feel the same way about the Church. Every few months, someone seems to come up with another set of statistics indicating a state of terminal decline.

Today has been called 'the birthday of the Church'. The gift of the Holy Spirit, Luke tells us, transformed a couple of bus loads of people into an unstoppable force, like a torrent of water released from a dam. The work begun in the incarnation continues, as the Good News is spread in every language and culture of the known world. From the outset, it seems, the gifts of the Spirit are not to be hoarded; they are to be poured out by those who have received them in a similar pattern of generosity.

All too often, our churches have become greedy organisations. "Who will feed us?" we ask; we almost devour anyone who is young (and by that, we often mean under 55!), and with abilities and time to spare. We jealously guard what is 'ours'; we see opportunities for sharing resources as an intrusion, an imposition. Our life becomes serious and sober; no one has ever accused our services of resembling a really good party!

This Pentecost, is our church more likely to receive birthday cards or get well soon cards? And what does this say about our use of the gifts of God's Spirit?

## **A - Trinity Sunday**

"Aim for perfection" Paul wrote in his parting words to the Church at Corinth. A pipe dream? Can anyone really hope for perfection? Aim for perfection, yes; but is there any real hope of achieving it?

Perfection, said Newman, is completeness. We experience it when we encounter the risen Christ in the unity of the Godhead; the perfect unity to which Paul commended his readers. Perfection here is not some static state; it is expressed through the interactions of love which lie at the heart of God. The kiss of greeting that Paul commends is a recognition of the unique value of the other, without which I shall not be brought to perfection myself.

Within this pattern, we find Christian Stewardship, with its affirmation of the contribution each person makes through his or her gifts, of skill or of money; through the offering of time, as we seek to bring our incarnation into this particular part of history under the rule of Christ. We work towards, not some abstract, unattainable state, but towards a point where we are fully fitted for God's purposes; where we play our full part in the work of bringing in his kingdom.

## **A - Proper 4**

### **Sunday between 29 May and 4 June**

Almost thirty years ago, on the edge of the village in which we then lived, the County Council started work on the by-pass. As underpasses and flyovers grew, they were reproduced in the sandpit in the garden by our fascinated three-year-old son. They didn't work. You can't reproduce in sand what is created using reinforced concrete!

There are two kinds of law. There is law which describes 'things as they ought to be'; most of our legislation, including the Ten Commandments, comes into this category. The consequences of breaking such laws depend on your conscience, and the probability of being caught! The second kind of law describes 'things as they are'. Most of the laws of science come into this category; you cannot step off a high cliff and hope to escape the law of gravity! And so do the laws of the spiritual world, summed up most succinctly by St John, when he wrote, "He who does not love remains in death." To ignore such laws is to build your house on the sand of human perception and understanding.

Christian Stewardship is a call to live in the generosity of love. It is not a call to be bound by percentages, or targets, but a call to the freedom of total self-giving, to living by grace. It is a description, not of 'things as they ought to be', but of 'things as they are' in the new economy of God's kingdom. As the writers of Deuteronomy put it, it is a matter of choosing life; of building our lives on the rock of God's generous love.

## **A - Proper 5**

### **Sunday between 5 - 11 June**

Only Matthew juxtaposes these stories in this way. In his pursuit of the question of 'the Law', and its relationship to the mission of Jesus, they show a subtlety which is illuminating. 'Keeping the Law' had become a way of excluding people, by classifying them as 'sinners' if they failed to keep even a single point. Matthew holds up two cases, one of which is voluntary, and one involuntary, and looks at the approach of Jesus to each.

The call of Matthew shows Jesus repeating, and indeed intensifying, his earlier liberal attitude to the Law. If fishermen were marginal, with the demands of their work, there could be no doubts about Matthew. The purity code of the strict Pharisee plays no part in the call of the disciples.

The story that follows amplifies this theme. A woman who, for twelve years, has been excluded by the purity code makes Jesus himself unclean. For the ruler (one of those who enforces the same code), the only hope of his daughter's restoration is taken away. But, somehow, Jesus overcomes his scruples, and his daughter is restored. The story emphasises (and in Luke's account, the point is made even more clearly) that it is not the contractual basis of the Law ('Do this and you will live'), but the transforming grace of the coming kingdom which is the basis of this new relationship. As Hosea reminded his hearers, God requires mercy, not sacrifice, because his justice is executed through love.

All too often, our stewardship is seen in terms of Law, not love. We need to emphasise, not the PCC's budget, or the need to pay the Parish Share; we need to emphasise the love which God showers on each one of us day by day, and the love we are invited to offer in return.

## **A - Proper 6**

### **Sunday between 12 – 18 June**

'I hadn't realised stewardship was so spiritual', said one incumbent at the end of a PCC meeting, 'and I hadn't realised it could be so much fun!' We rarely read the Bible for its laughs; but there's a deep thread of humour running through it which, in the solemnity of our worship, we sometimes miss.

One of today's Old Testament readings reminds us of the reaction of Sarah when she overhears God's plans for her. The beginning of God's scheme for the redemption of his

people is conceived in laughter. It's a reminder that God's design is not the calculation of the engineer, but the laughter of the artist in love with his creation.

Christian Stewardship walks a tightrope between duty and joy. On the one hand, there is our laughter, our joy, at the unparalleled generosity of God; the generosity on which Paul reflects in our Epistle. And there is the call of Jesus to his disciples in the Gospel to match that generosity as we commit ourselves as co-workers in the harvest of his kingdom. If 'the labourers are few', is this a comment on how little we heed that call, and of how weak our discipleship, our stewardship of the resources entrusted to his Church for this task?

## **A - Proper 7**

### **Sunday between 19 – 25 June**

I was with my father at a football match. As the new signing was easily dispossessed yet again, the man in front turned in his seat and said, "I don't care if they paid nothing for him; he's not worth it!"

How do you assess what someone is 'worth'? Both Hagar and Ishmael, and Jeremiah, in their own ways, have their value questioned; and are affirmed by God. In our Epistle, Paul states that our value is given by our baptism into Christ's death. And the words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel proclaim a world in which the ordinary concepts of 'value', of 'precedence', are turned upside down by the values of the kingdom.

'Taking up your cross' is not an image that strikes an immediate chord with us, as it would have done with Jesus' first hearers. Perhaps the nearest parallel would be an invitation to become a Palestinian suicide bomber, sacrificing oneself with no hope of escape.

This is the denial of the worth of the individual; it proclaims a future without hope. I am not even of as much value as much as a single sparrow. The disciples of Jesus are to proclaim by their lives that each individual is of infinite worth. They are to exercise their stewardship in such a way that the transforming values of his kingdom are revealed.

## **A - Proper 8**

### **Sunday between 26 June – 2 July**

A policeman stopped a bishop on his way home from a parish one evening. 'I'm afraid I'll have to report you, sir', he said. 'Did you realise you've just driven straight through a red light?' 'I'm sorry', said the bishop, 'but when I get to court I shall ask them to take into consideration the number of times I've stopped at a green light, even if no-one was watching!'

All of us harbour a secret wish that, somewhere, someone is keeping a record. For all I know, this may be the case; but it certainly isn't God, who 'in Christ has cancelled the writing that stood against us.' From his point of view, all that matters is his grace. Paul puts this, strongly and graphically, as 'slavery to righteousness.'

Jesus, in the passage which forms today's Gospel, speaks of various 'rewards'. It is an expression of the mutuality that lies at the heart of God's creation. Out of the interaction, the sharing that lies at the heart of the Trinity comes a pattern of interaction, of sharing, which flows from Jesus to the whole of humanity. The eternal life we inherit is revealed in the transactions of Love. It is these that we seek to earth in our stewardship.

## **A - Proper 9**

### **Sunday between 3 – 9 July**

When the children had grown up and left home, John and his wife decided to move to a smaller house. John, however, was greatly concerned about what would happen to his beloved pigeons. He voiced his fears down at the local pub, and a number of his friends offered to come and help move the loft into his new garden.

The appointed day was hot, and as his friends struggled down the road, their burden seemed far heavier than they had expected. "There's some solid timber in this, John" called one. "There's no need to shout" came a reply; "he's on your side." "No, he's not!" "Well, he's

not on ours!" They came to a halt. "Well, I don't think much of this! We turn out to move the loft, and old John isn't even here to give us a hand! It'd serve him right if we just left it here in the middle of the street!"

And then, from over their heads, there came a faint voice. "Keep going, lads! It's not far now! And don't say I'm not helping; I'm inside, carrying the perches!"

Christian stewardship, and especially financial stewardship, is sometimes seen in a similar light; another burden to be laid on the weary. We are busy people; our lives are already full of other people's demands. We simply don't have time to do any more. Can we realistically ask the members of our congregations to give 10%, or even 5%, of their incomes to God's work in his world? Isn't it unrealistic? Does the church really need all this money to fund its grandiose schemes which have no effect on our local church?

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn" quoted Jesus of those who are never pleased. They consider 'carrying the perches' to be all that is necessary; the work of moving the church forward in mission can be left to others!

Ask any congregation, and you will discover that they have dreams. 'We want our congregation to grow; we want more young families; we want more people to help in the mission of the church.' Christian stewardship is about developing the latent resources to achieve such aims.

## **A - Proper 10**

### **Sunday between 10 – 16 July**

I want to suggest that we begin by taking the scriptures out of their box and playing with them for a little. Don't worry; they're tough enough; they won't break if you drop them!

'The sower sows the word' says Jesus. But what exactly is sown? I want to imagine that, by a fortuitous chance, or the action of the Holy Spirit, 'The Word', the 'logos' of John's Gospel, is what is meant. And this liberating perspective totally alters how we view this story. For it means that the Word, Jesus himself, is already in every situation we encounter, by the will and through the action of his father.

Even the inevitable setbacks and frustrations in the life of the church take on a new meaning. The birds which reduce the harvest are part of the divine economy and are sustained by it! From their point of view, the sole purpose of the seed is to feed them. But 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'

Christian Stewardship is therefore, not a desperate appeal for the scarce resources the church needs, but a process of discovering the hidden riches of Christ within his body, the church. It is about being fruitful for God's kingdom. It is about breaking open the hard places, clearing the clutter of undergrowth, and allowing the light and warmth of the Spirit to bring the seed to germination.

Perhaps we need to remember, too, that the growth of the harvest is always, and inevitably, accomplished through the 'death' of the seed. The harvest is in the new life of the resurrection.

## **A - Proper 11**

### **Sunday between 17 – 23 July**

The story is told of a man who saw his first thermos flask. 'What does it do?' he asked. 'It keeps hot things hot and cold things cold' was the reply. He bought it, and was disappointed with the result when he used it to hold a couple of cups of coffee and a choc-ice!

Some things just don't mix. Part of the problem with being human, as both Jesus and Paul point out in our Gospel and Epistle today, stems from the intimate interweaving of the strands that make up our nature. We are not the controlled, rational beings we believe we are for most of the time. All of us can be swayed, for good or ill, by deep, irrational drives over which we feel we have little control. The picture we project of ourselves is constantly betrayed by the enemy within.

Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in our approach to Christian stewardship. Faced with the need to express our faith through our giving of our time, talents and treasure, it is amazing how quickly the 'spirit of sonship', of freedom to live in and for God, can be replaced by the 'spirit that makes us a slave again to fear'.

Nowhere in Jesus' parable is there any doubt about the eventual harvest. Indeed, the tolerance of the weeds is essential to ensure the crop ripens fully, so that it may 'shine like the sun in the Father's kingdom'. Our stewardship is always imperfect; having done all we can, we can only say, "We are unprofitable servants" while we wait patiently for the coming of the kingdom.

## **A - Proper 12**

### **Sunday between 24 – 30 July**

Some years ago, at a conference, a group of us discussed the question, 'Did Jesus have failures?' At times, the discussion became quite heated! Some people, it seemed, wanted to ensure that he was immune to failure. God, it seemed, had to be constrained by their world-picture in which success was all, and the slightest failure was unthinkable. Yet the illustrations Jesus gives of the growth of the kingdom are largely organic; they offer a picture of life in all its frailty and vulnerability.

Paul, in a hymn that celebrates the Christian life, seems to adopt a similar approach. "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" he asks. His rhetorical answer includes both the man-made and natural disasters that encompass the contents of our television screens night after night. Writing against the context of a world in which the life of most people was 'nasty, brutish and short', Paul sees the Christian as sharing in the common lot of humanity, and through this, sees its glory in the love of God.

There is a perversion of Christian stewardship (and it is no less a perversion because of its ability to selectively quote texts based on the earlier history of God's people) that is based on the false doctrine of success. 'Give your tithe', it proclaims, 'and enjoy God's protection.' Sadly, it invokes the God neither of Jesus nor of Paul. The offerings of Christian stewardship are made out of vulnerability; like all human activity, they carry the possibility of failure. But, placed in God's hands, they carry, too, the certainty of resurrection.

## **A - Proper 13**

### **Sunday between 31 July – 6 August**

The story of the feeding of the five thousand always brings back memories of running a diocesan tent at an agricultural show. In the course of three days, we served over 13,000 cups of tea and coffee – on a pitch that was a quarter of a mile from the nearest tap! The sight of another weary family descending on the tent at the end of a hot day as our supplies dwindled made us wish for the ability to multiply our resources as easily!

It's a feeling I've encountered in many of our PCCs, too. It's so easy to identify with the disciples in our Gospel. 'Our resources are falling; we don't have enough people / time / energy / money. How can we cope with life as a Church any more? We know what we ought to be doing, but it seems beyond us. We feel as though we, too, are in a desert.'

What Jesus does not do is ask his disciples for even more effort, even more frenzied activity. 'Bring what you have to me', he says. The only thing they need to have is obedience to his word. Once placed in his hands, even the most meagre of resources can have far-reaching effects, beyond our wildest imaginings. But for this to happen, they must be surrendered, broken and shared. As long as we cling to what is 'ours', individually, or as a church, this cannot occur.

Christian stewardship is about learning, or re-learning, this pattern of generous living, of being free to surrender ourselves, our possessions, our plans, our dreams into Christ's hands, so that he can use them to build his kingdom.

## **A - Proper 14**

### **Sunday between 7 – 13 August**

Our Gospel today recounts one of those strange events with which we often feel distinctly uncomfortable. In our experience, ‘walking on water’ is associated with spectacularly successful footballers.

In the aftermath of the feeding of the 5,000, (when, according to John, there was a danger of a revolutionary movement using Jesus as a figurehead), Jesus’ first concern seems to have been for his disciples safety. He sends them away, across the lake, out of danger, while he himself takes to the hills.

But the need for psychological safety, freedom from false perceptions about the nature of his kingdom, is replaced by a need for physical safety. A small boat on open water in the dark is particularly vulnerable to the sudden storms of Galilee, and the darkness, hiding the stars, is disorientating. From the dangers of being psychologically and spiritually adrift, the disciples face the danger of being physically adrift.

Under pressure from the crowd, Jesus sent the disciples away. Under pressure from the storm, he comes to them. All the evangelists but Luke record the event; and whether we regard it as a literal account or as an allegory, it is clear – particularly in Matthew’s version – that there is a declaration of the fact that there are no circumstances beyond the authority of the one whom the disciples are coming to know as Lord.

The test of our stewardship is our willingness to launch out, trusting that God will sustain us. What holds back our giving – of time talents or money – is the fear of being swamped by changing circumstances; of not being in control. We may not be; but we can safely put our trust in the One who is.

## **A - Proper 15**

### **Sunday between 14 – 20 August**

A newly-appointed magistrate was among a group being instructed by the Clerk of the Court in his responsibilities, and in the way he expected his court to be run. After the first 10 minutes, he turned to an older, more experienced magistrate, and whispered, “What exactly is he for?” “He’s not for”, came the reply; “he’s against us!”

The Canaanite woman who features in today’s Gospel may well have felt something similar. Here, only a few feet away, is the one on whom her hopes for her daughter’s health have been fixed, and he seems to be completely ignoring her. His words, his actions, his whole demeanour exclude her even from consideration. Jesus, it seems, is not for her; he is against her.

Is it her persistence or her quick wit that wins him over? After a rebuff that sounds even harsher in the Aramaic than most English translations allow, are we too daring if we say that the answer is ‘neither’? Jesus is demonstrating, in an acted parable, the same point that Paul makes in today’s Epistle; we do not need to win God over by our urgency or the eloquence of our appeals. He is already on our side. The judge has decided in our favour before the case is presented.

We find this repugnant on two levels. We are suspicious of the ‘free gift’; we instinctively look for the catch. And secondly, if there is a free gift, we want it to be a little more exclusive! We don’t want it open to just anybody. On these two points hang almost all the objections raised to the Gospel!

As long as we worry about the cost of grace, we cannot begin to exercise our stewardship. Alan Plater defined a zealot as ‘a man who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten the point’. Stewardship is a response to the vision of God’s love. Perhaps our churches need less zeal, and more stewardship?

## **A - Proper 16**

### **Sunday between 21 – 27 August**

'This boy', a school report read, 'has hidden depths; although when you look at him, it's easy to see that any depths must be well hidden!'

Paul's image of the Church as the Body of Christ means that we may legitimately ask, 'What are the 'hidden depths' concealed in our congregations?' In the human body, there are limbs and organs whose function is obvious – the eye, the hand, the foot. But a survey of a typical congregation is likely to produce considerable vagueness once you go on to the spleen, the pancreas and the bronchioles! Yet without them, your health would be severely impaired. As with so many other things, we only become aware of them when something goes wrong.

Many people believe that the Church is facing a crisis at present; falling congregations, a lack of money, too few people to carry out its mission. Does this mean that parts of the body, parts which are unglamorous, hidden, often neglected, are suffering? Christian stewardship is not just about getting the jobs done; it is about ensuring that all the parts of the body work together in mutual support. One of the loveliest definitions of the Church is 'a community in which broken men and women are loved into wholeness by those who share their brokenness, but are themselves being healed by a master physician.'

It is as we recognise and affirm the gifts that each individual brings to the mission of God that part of that healing can take place. For some people, their main contribution will be financial; their time and skills are fully committed elsewhere – and not necessarily less valuable in terms of building the kingdom. Others may have limited financial resources, but be rich in time and compassion, or have practical skills to offer. What is important is that the local church celebrates the diversity of resources given to it and directs it towards its mission.

## **A - Proper 17**

### **Sunday between 28 August – 3 September**

In work with a parish some years ago, we used an exercise based on Mark's account of the raising of Jairus' daughter. We asked, 'Who, in our church and community, is Jairus?' – and the PCC felt that there were times when they fulfilled that rôle. We asked, 'Who is the woman?' – and came up with a range of answers. Then we asked, 'Where is Jesus?' Very tentatively, a churchwarden said quietly, 'I think he's probably with the woman. I'm not sure if he's in our church very much; but if he is, I think he's probably very unhappy.'

It was a turning point. Over the next few months, the whole agenda of the PCC changed from the previous struggle with maintenance, to a search to answer the questions, 'Where is Jesus at work in our parish? And what do we need to do to join in that work?' It wasn't easy; but in seeking the answers, they discovered a whole range of gifts lying latent on which they could draw.

I've always said that the job of the stewardship adviser is not to take away a parish's problems, but to introduce them to a more relevant set of problems! This is not always easy. Today's Gospel shows how difficult it was for Jesus to bring home to the disciples the reality of being part of a redeeming, servant community. Doing so, living by the values of the Kingdom, may mean flying in the face of conventional wisdom. Paul, in our Epistle, indicates some of the implications for the life of the church in Rome of living within this Kingdom of Love.

Living within the Kingdom of Love is the root of all stewardship. Our giving is part of our response to the love of God; it is worked out in the giving of ourselves, not merely our time, talents and treasure. It involves taking up our cross, being where Jesus is at work in his world. It is part of discovering our vocation as a disciple.

## **A - Proper 18**

### **Sunday between 4 – 10 September**

“We can lend you enough money to get out of debt!” the poster proclaimed. I couldn’t help feeling there was a fault in the logic somewhere.

We live in a society which runs on debt – which we sanitise as ‘credit’. Excluding mortgages, the average family owes around £22,000 in credit and store cards, bank loans, and similar sources of spending. Most of us receive several more invitations every week to join the herd.

It would be hard, today, to imagine a world in which Paul’s injunction to the Roman Christians could be taken literally. Yet ‘the continuing debt to love one another’ lies at the very heart of our stewardship. ‘To love our neighbour as ourselves’ means to live in a world in which we reject the commercial and political pressures which exploit our neighbour; which offers underpaid, dangerous work in squalid conditions as the only alternative to starvation; which deprives children of childhood, forces families apart to satisfy the demands of migrant labour. “I can’t talk religion to a man with bodily hunger in his eyes” wrote Shaw in his play ‘Major Barbara’; are our consciences sometime dulled because the eyes are hidden by distance?

‘Being clothed in Christ’ means being willing to put on the suffering of the world’s outcasts. While it may not be possible to do so literally, it is certainly possible to ask awkward and uncomfortable questions, of ourselves and others, about the outcome of the choices we make about our lifestyle. They are among the questions that our brothers and sisters in the Third World have put to us through the Earth Summit in Johannesburg recently. How will we respond?

## **A - Proper 19**

### **Sunday between 11 – 7 September**

In Ursula K Le Guin’s novel, ‘The Tombs of Atuan’, Ahar asks the High Priestess, “What are Gontish men like?” “They are vile and black and horrible. I have never seen one.” is the reply.

We all judge, in part at least, by our parent’s standards. In some cases, it is our psychological parents, rather than our physical parents, who have determined our views. In the history of the Children of Israel, the crossing of the Red Sea which some of you will have read as the Old Testament lesson this morning, forms a cultural and psychological landmark in the nation’s consciousness. Out of it came the people of the Exodus, the people of the Passover; the chosen people. The subsequent history of Israel is the story of the constant battle between being ‘chosen from’ and being ‘chosen for’, with all the judgements that imposed.

In our stewardship, there is a constant temptation both to judge our sister or brother, and to assume that our own standard of giving is superior. Paul reminds the Roman church that the only criterion is service in obedience to God’s will. The standard of service to which others are called is irrelevant. God measures faithfulness, not ‘success’.

Our Gospel makes a similar point. Judgement is to be corporate, and in full knowledge of all the facts; it is never to be a matter for private prejudice. If we are honest, we all love to be sinned against; it puts the other person in our power; it makes us superior. Jesus reminds us that where personalities clash, he is to be encountered; the wounds we create, the healing we minister, are his wounds, his healing.

## **A - Proper 20**

### **Sunday between 18 – 24 September**

A keen fisherman invited some friends to dinner. Bringing a salmon to the table, he announced, “You know, I fought this fish for almost half an hour!” “Yes”, one of the guests

replied, “why someone can’t invent a decent can-opener, I just don’t know.”

As we all know, effort and achievement don’t always go hand in hand. Certainly, that must have been the feeling of those who, at the end of a day’s work on the harvest, received their due reward and found it equal to that given to those who had only worked for an hour. But this is the result of God’s ‘Equal Opportunities’ policy. We like to imagine that grace can be ‘earned’; that our efforts can, in some way, win God’s approval. We can only hope that God finds such an attitude amusing, in the same way that we often smile at the earnest efforts of young children to complete some simple task.

When it comes to our turn, in our stewardship, we are called to show the same characteristic of gracious generosity as God. We try to work out our ‘fair share’ of the ‘cost’ of our local church; we compare our giving favourably (or unfavourably!) with that of our neighbours. But whenever we turn aside to such matters, we cease to be ‘fruitful for Christ’, as Paul puts it in our Epistle. A few verses later, he refers to the Philippians ‘progress and joy in the faith’; how odd, then, that a chance to ‘progress’ in our approach to giving back to God is so often greeted with gloom!

## ***A - Proper 21***

### ***Sunday between 25 September – 1 October***

A few weeks ago, my wife and I visited the gardens exhibition at Westonbirt. As we entered on of the gardens, a man leaving remarked, “As a garden, it’s a good installation; but as an installation, it’s pretentious tat!” We gathered he was not impressed with what he had just seen!

Donald Swann once said that, when an aspiring author sent him an unprintable manuscript for comment, his usual response was, “How you must have enjoyed writing that” – on a par with Shaw’s, “I shall lose no time in reading it” for a gently ambiguous response. We all have likes and dislikes, of course – but the way in which we settle disputes is even more important.

It seems that, while Jesus’ teaching was popular with the crowds, even if they didn’t always grasp its significance, that popularity wasn’t universally shared by the religious leaders of his day. It’s unlikely to have been a matter of style; Jesus’ teaching techniques were mirrored by many of the rabbis. And his content was paralleled by groups such as the Essenes. It seems that what set him apart was the fact that he based his teaching on a direct appeal to his Father’s will, as much as to the traditions of any particular rabbinical school. This made it, not a matter of taste, but a matter of authority. Behind the scribe’s question is the desire to know, “Who taught you? To which tradition do you belong?”

Tradition may be a source of strength or of weakness. I once knew one church which had become, although the congregation didn’t realise it, a shrine to the man who had been vicar from 1908 to 1955, and where nothing was allowed to change from what he had known. Suggesting that we sang a Taizé chant was being a dangerous revolutionary! As the congregation grew older, they became more resistant to change. A living tradition had become an empty shell, and was rapidly becoming a tomb.

Stewardship, too, can become a tradition, a tomb. We need, periodically, to renew our vision, our sense of vocation, if what we offer is not to become irrelevant to the demands of the Gospel today. To be stewards is to be constantly aware of the need to redirect resources to where they will be most effective in mission. If our giving, of time, talents or treasure, has not changed in the last few years, how relevant are they to the needs of the church today?

## ***A - Proper 22***

### ***Sunday between 2 – 8 October***

Possession, it is said, is nine points of the law. However, that’s only helpful if the total number of points is 17 or less. If it’s 19 or more, you’re in a minority position!

It’s not that the tenants in this parable have forgotten that they are tenants. It’s that they resent the fact. Not content with an apparently easy-going absentee landlord, they assume

that might makes right. They have forgotten their responsibility as stewards of his property, and seek to deprive him of what is rightfully his.

The great heresy of the Age of Enlightenment was to see humanity as the lord, rather than the steward, of creation. We have come to believe that God operates only as some kind of celestial longstop, to be called on in case of emergency, but, for all practical purposes, remote from our daily life. To take him seriously is to court either suspicion, as a fanatic, or derision, as a simpleton. It takes a Soham, or an 11th September, to remind us that there are forces and factors we do not fully understand and cannot control that disrupt the illusion of order in which we live.

It can be tempting to pass the buck. But this is equally unhelpful. Stewardship is a call to live responsibly under God, aware of our potential and gifts, but knowing too the call to use them in a way that aligns them with the values of God's kingdom.

## **A - Proper 23**

### **Sunday between 9 – 15 October**

'Dress: optional' read the invitation. I only hoped none of those invited was a naturist! But the fate of the man without the wedding clothes at the banquet which is the subject of this parable was guilty of more than a mere misunderstanding.

Jesus told this parable to bring home the inclusive generosity which is the hallmark of his father's kingdom. The banquet is prepared in honour of the king's son; but forget the picture of a modern, romantic marriage. His wedding would have been arranged to cement relations, improve trade, and generally increase the security and prosperity of the people. There is something here for everyone to celebrate. Yet those who are invited – presumably, those who have most to gain – are precisely the people who ignore the celebration.

But the king is determined to proceed; and the hall is filled with those who would normally never even dream of being admitted to such an event. As each one enters, he is given a ceremonial shawl as a sign of honour; and it is for this, his refusal to share in the joy of the king, that he is subsequently excluded.

We, too, are invited to share in God's joy over the redemption of his creation. One of the ways in which we participate in this celebration is through our thankful offering of our time, talents and treasure in our stewardship. Dare we face the fact that, so often, more is given, both absolutely and in relative terms, by the poor in our church than by the rich? Could it be because, like many of the members of the church at Philippi, they have fewer human resources, and know more clearly the importance of a daily dependence on God?

## **A - Proper 24**

### **Sunday between 16 – 22 October**

Someone once said that the only certainties in life were death and taxes; and of the two, death was preferable, because at least it didn't come every year!

Jesus' evasion of the Pharisee's trap is a masterly use of rabbinic technique. ('Rabbi, why do you always answer a question with another question?' 'Why shouldn't I answer a question with another question?') But there's more to it than that. To give any answer is ally himself with the Pharisees, whose ability to elaborate the Law to cover every eventuality seemed to know no bounds. 'Give Caesar what is Caesar's and god what is God's' is more than a clever answer; it cuts at the root of any suggestion of legalism. What is God's is love; what is given back to God must also be love.

This is why Paul can hold up the church in Thessalonica as a model for the wider Christian community. Their love for their Lord is expressed in the life of each individual, and of the whole community of the church. Christian stewardship, which begins and ends in the giving of the isolated individual has little to do with the values of the gospel.

## **A - Proper 25**

### **Sunday between 23 – 29 October**

Jewish commentators on this passage in Deuteronomy asked, “What does it mean to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength?” They had no real difficulty with ‘heart’, ‘soul’ and ‘mind’, but ‘strength’ gave them some difficulty. Eventually, one school of Rabbis decided it meant ‘money’; perhaps that’s why the tax collector Matthew left it out of his list!

Somehow, ‘strength’ sounds so much easier than ‘money’. There is a heroic sound to it; it resonates with the ‘muscular Christianity’ of so much nineteenth century missionary endeavour. ‘Loving God with all our money’ seems somehow cold and impersonal. It’s a little like the story of the RSM who called for volunteers for something ‘big and clean’; those who took two paces forward found themselves on their hands and knees scrubbing the parade ground.

We need to remember that the key to this passage is that the command is to love God. Given this, how our love is expressed becomes secondary. It is inevitable that love will overflow into those areas of life from which we wish to exclude it; where we try to say, “No, Lord, not yet; that’s still mine.” In the end, it will include our money. God’s passion for his creation will not allow any part of it to remain unredeemed.

## **A - All Saints**

### **1 November**

“Who does s/he take after?” is one of the first questions asked about most babies. In many cases, an honest answer would probably be ‘Winston Churchill’ – without the cigar, of course! It’s only later that family resemblances begin to emerge.

The Christian, says St John in our Epistle, takes after Jesus, growing more and more like him. But children are not merely clones of their parents; each child is an individual, with his or her own personality. The love of God celebrates and rejoices in the uniqueness of each individual, and does so by declaring the family resemblance through saying, “You are one of my saints.”

Our Gospel gives a hint of what that family resemblance will be. Jesus says we are to rejoice as the family likeness becomes clearer. But we are not to become identical. We become saints as we express the values of his Kingdom in the context, and amid all the stresses, of our everyday lives. Christian stewardship gives a framework within which this can take place, as we test the values by which we live against the values seen in the lives of those who have gone before.

## **A - Fourth Sunday before Advent**

A prominent theologian was asked on American television, “How would you like to see the end of the world?” “From a long way off” was his thoughtful reply.

Every person sees the world from the perspective of his or her own life. We know that there was a time when the world’s activity did not include us, before we were born; we know that there will be a time when the world’s activity will not include us, after our death; but we cannot feel such a time; we cannot experience it. And so what lasts longer than our own lifetime becomes part of our frame of reference, by which we steer our path through the world.

‘Nothing’, Jesus says to the disciples ‘is permanent. Not even change. There is an end to all things; either the stillness of death or the stillness of repose in perfect love.’

The Christian pilgrimage is towards a time when movement ceases because time itself has ceased – for without time, how can we measure movement? ‘To live is to change; to be perfect is to have changed often’, wrote Newman; but with perfection, completeness for the purposes of God, comes the end of change. But, while we have time – and through time, the means of expressing ourselves through our skills and our resources – what will we say?

## **A - Third Sunday before Advent**

The story is told of an innocent young curate addressing a men's group on this parable. "Where would you rather be?" he asked, "with the wise virgins in the light, or the foolish virgins in the dark?" The answer was unanimous!

Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that this parable, like all the so-called 'parables of judgement', is about, not exclusion, but inclusion. The banquet of Christ's kingdom is open to all; there is no one who cannot find a place reserved for them. Yet it seems there will be empty seats.

It's all a question of priorities. The bridesmaids who gain admission have made elaborate provision, bringing extra oil, which no one would normally even think of doing. Their commitment to the wedding is overriding. Those who find themselves excluded have not been, in human terms, 'foolish'. Their lamps burned into the night, and no normal person would travel in the dangers of darkness. Come the dawn, and there will be no need of lights. But the bridegroom demands, not merely assent, but total commitment.

It's no coincidence that the annual renewal of Christian stewardship often takes place on 'Commitment Sunday'. Our stewardship is a matter, not just of our human care for the budget of the local church; it is a symbol of our total commitment to Christ, and our readiness to extravagant sacrifice as we await his return.

## **A - Second Sunday before Advent**

'Talent' has been defined as 'the gifts we bring to life'. We always assume that a talent is a source of joy; but we need to remember that it can also be a burden, a source of exploitation. It can be all too easy to see only the talent, and not the person in whom it resides; when this happens, the exercise of that talent can leave the person alienated.

Perhaps this was true of the third servant. Certainly, the exercise of his administrative and financial ability (and we must assume that he possessed these) brought him little joy. He saw himself as oppressed and exploited by a harsh master who saw him simply as a means of greater gain. He's like one of my son's friends, who, having graduated from Cambridge, said to his parents, "Now I'm going to do what I want!" and became a motorcycle dispatch rider. (His mother describes him as a social abseiler!)

Talent is closely linked with vocation. To be entrusted with a talent is to be faced with the question, 'In what way can this further the coming of God's kingdom?' Sometimes, we may need to encourage a talented Christian to escape from the clutches of a greedy church into the world where the values of the kingdom need to be used.

The hallmark of an effectively used talent is that, not only does the talent attract interest, but so does the person!

## **A - Christ the King The Sunday next before Advent**

It was Terry Pratchett who said that the shape of a religion depended on whether a revelation came to a shepherd or a goatherd – 'for sheep are stupid, and have to be driven, but goats are intelligent, and can only be led.' I'm not sure it's purely intelligence; sheep tend to react as a flock, and goats are more individualists. What's certain is that the Israelites tended to think of themselves as shepherds, even when they also kept goats; and perhaps because the goats gave more trouble, they tended to get a bad press.

Both were kept for milk, meat, fleece and hides, and, productively speaking, there's not a lot to choose between them. But God was always the shepherd, rather than the goatherd, of Israel – although on all the evidence of the Old Testament, his people had far more of the characteristics of goats than sheep!

"Who? Us?" is the response of the goats when asked why they had so signally failed to show the marks of the kingdom in their lives. "I don't understand. We have been honest, hardworking goats all our lives. We've never been dependant on other people like those

sheep over there, always looking for someone to get them out of another crisis. If anyone wanted anything, they only had to ask – no buts!”

“Haven’t you forgotten the time when you and that lamb wandered off and got stuck on that cliff?” replies the shepherd. “You couldn’t go forward, and the lamb was blocking the way back. If I hadn’t found you and rescued you, what life would you have?”

Which are we – thankful sheep, or proud, independent goats?

## **YEAR B**

### ***B - First Sunday of Advent***

I strongly suspect that, like me, many of you have been written to recently by ‘Reader’s Digest’. Through the letterbox have come offers of what they consider to be irresistible prizes but only if I reply by the specified date. If you usually bin them unopened, you really should read just one to get the full flavour. There is an urgency, an evangelical fervour about the writing that seeks to persuade you that this organisation really has your best interests at heart and wants you to respond. Of course, they do; but it’s not entirely disinterested!

Writing to the Christians in Corinth, Paul begins by giving thanks for the wealth of gifts God has showered on them, and reminds them that God will continue to work with them. He echoes the words with which our Gospel concludes; the master expects his servants to continue their work during his absence, just as if he were personally supervising them.

The beginning of Advent is no bad time to reflect on our stewardship. The gifts that God longs to give us are far greater than anything ‘Readers’ Digest’ could ever offer; are we as eager to receive them? How well are we employing our gifts? Or are they lying, hidden, in the back of a cupboard, where we hope no one will notice them? Do our lives reflect the attitude of thankfulness to God that was so evident in the church at Corinth? What are we advertising, day by day?

### ***B - The First Sunday after Epiphany The Baptism of Christ***

A friend of mine used to have, on his office wall, the cryptic admonition, ‘TTT’. When asked what it represented, he said it was a reminder; ‘Things Take Time’. Sometimes, the description of the life of the Church in Acts gives the impression of breathless activity; we need to remember that, on this, his second visit to Ephesus, Paul spent some two years there. ‘Things Take Time’.

If Acts is fast-moving, Mark’s Gospel is a runaway train! The opening chapters move at a frenetic pace; but here, in the opening verses, there is a pause, a moment of balance before the leap into action. John the Baptist appears – from where, and when, is not something that concerns Mark – and with the baptism of Jesus, the story of his gospel begins.

One of the things our stewardship asks of us is a sense of balance, a sense of timing. How, amid all the pressures of everyday life, all the demands for instant solutions, instant action, instant response, can we show that we live by the values of eternity? To what is our time, our energy and our money devoted?

### ***B - The Second Sunday after Epiphany***

‘Who shall I say is calling?’ the receptionist asked when I phoned a large organisation the other day. It’s always helpful to know! One of the things I dislike most is that minority of people who assume that, because they’ve phoned me, I must automatically know who is at the other end of the line. As Ira Gershwin put it, ‘It ain’t necessarily so!’

John’s account of the call of the first disciples differs from that of the other evangelists. Andrew and Philip are directed to Jesus by John, and it is through them that Simon Peter and Nathaniel are recruited. In Nathaniel’s case, the impetus for Philip to introduce him is

Jesus decision to leave the Jordan Valley for Galilee, their home area.

For most people, the journey to stewardship begins with a personal invitation. Often, as in the case of Nathaniel, it is treated with some suspicion. In one parish, I was told, 'It's just a way of getting us to pay the quota to keep those fat cats in the diocesan office!' The only possible response is, 'Come and see.' Begin to discover what can happen when you begin to attempt to live wholeheartedly by the values of the Gospel; to invite others to share in the experience; to begin, not simply to go to church, but to be the church.

## ***B - The Third Sunday after Epiphany***

Be deeply suspicious of those who claim they want to return to 'the good old days'. They almost certainly want to go back to a time that exists nowhere outside their heads.

The imagery of the Bible is a story of increasing complexity. It begins in a garden and ends in a city. It begins with two individuals, and ends with an innumerable crowd of people. And along the way, it celebrates both the high and low points of human existence. Today's Gospel is a case in point.

Jesus and the disciples are among the guests at a wedding – a new beginning in the life of a couple, and an excuse for a party. John pays little attention to the aspects of Jesus work, in teaching and healing that feature so largely on the synoptic gospels. As a poet, a master of language, his message is more subtle, more allusive. Jesus' ministry begins with a party. As today's Epistle reminds us, it will ultimately end with another party.

At a wedding among ordinary people in Jesus' day, responsibility for the catering was shared – a custom that might find favour with the father of some contemporary brides! Each family of guests would contribute – a batch of cakes, a jar or two of wine, a kid to be roasted – to what was very much a celebration for the entire village. And it seems that on this occasions, something has gone wrong.

Jesus takes no action on his own behalf. Mary first asks his help, and then forces his hand by instructing the servants. And when the wine is poured and tasted, there is no claim to glory – only the slaves, who have no part in the feast, are aware of what has happened.

How aware are we of the generosity God pours out on us day by day? And how do our actions show our gratitude?

## ***B - Proper 1*** ***Sunday between 3 – 9 February***

Samuel Butler said that the strongest evidence for Christ's influence over his disciples was that Peter remained friends with him even after Jesus had healed his Mother-in-Law. Perhaps it was because it got Peter out of cooking the supper!

Earlier, Paul has described himself as a 'servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of the Gospel', and now writes about what that means in practice. 'Being all things to all men' has acquired something of a bad press, as indicating that someone is unreliable and manipulative, but this is not the sense that Paul seeks to convey. He tells his readers that he tries to live in such a way as not to cause offence, while at the same time maintaining the distinctive standards of behaviour to which every Christian is called.

If we, like Paul, are stewards, in what ways does our lifestyle preach the Gospel? Two centuries ago, a philosopher asked, in revolutionary France, 'You call yourself a Christian. Pray, how are you to be distinguished from a heathen?' The question is still valid.

## ***B - Proper 2*** ***Sunday between 10 – 16 February***

'Nice guys come last'. Yet Paul seems to be encouraging competition in the Christian life. He's referring, of course, to the mission in which we all share, but his words can so easily be misunderstood. We've all met people who are proud of their humility; 'You've no idea what a poor opinion I have of myself, and how little I deserve it.'

How do we make choices? Jesus was faced with this issue. 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' If you have time, if I am important enough to fit into your world, if I come from the right background, you can be Christ for me. But it's all too easy to shut out the importunate, those from the wrong side of the tracks, those who have 'brought it on themselves', those who 'make no effort'. We justify ourselves by pleading all the pressures on us, all the demands of family, of church, even. We mark down the price of compassion.

'O Lord, I'm told I must compete,  
My neighbour is the one to beat.  
But, Lord, I want to be a friend  
On whom my neighbour can depend.'

We're all reliable people. But for what can we be relied on?

## ***B - The Second Sunday before Lent***

'In the beginning was the Word'. As I type, I echo this; the thought, the idea, are given form and substance; they can be shared. As you read them, you react; we share, we communicate; your story is added to mine, and together, we create something new. We 'dabar'; that wonderfully flexible Hebrew word that means both 'to speak' and 'to do'.

'The Word' means that God is what God says and what God does. Apart from that, there is only ambiguous silence. 'Starlight asked non-entity, 'Master, do you exist, or do you not exist?' However, he received no answer.'

To be created is to be in a universe subject to the laws of space and time; the only world creatures of space and time can know. 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' – with these people and not those, then and not now. The mind and will of the creator – the one who first speaks and acts – is to be understood in the words and actions he speaks and does within his creation. The key of the box in which we are locked is placed in our hands.

Which makes our stewardship – our use of the material world in which we live, and the time through which we live in it – of the greatest importance. It is nothing less than our response to our invitation to the dance of the life at the heart of God himself.

## ***B - The Sunday next before Lent***

It has been said that the world can be divided into two kinds of people; those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't. A more obvious division is into those who faced with a job, have all the preparations made weeks or months ahead, and those who don't even think about starting until five minutes after they have begun!

I suspect Elisha was one of the later. He was certainly reluctant to take over from Elijah as the foremost prophet of Israel. 'Yes, I do know, but do not speak of it' was his repeated response when he was asked for his views on the imminent removal of Elijah. 'I'll need a double helping of your spirit to take on this job', he tells Elijah, perhaps daunted by the prospect.

Many people find the prospect of responsibility frightening. In how many parishes is there a sudden hush as it's realised that a new Churchwarden, or Treasurer, is needed? Like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, the status quo seems irresistibly attractive; it provides security.

Yesterday, 1st March, was St David's day. One of the things for which he is remembered is his advice to 'do the little things you have heard and seen me do.' In the Christian life, it is often the need for repeated practice in what appears to be, by human standards, insignificant, that creates the ability grow and achieve greater things. Christian stewardship is part of this pattern of discipline, of training, which enables disciples to grow and become more effective in mission.

## **B - The First Sunday of Lent**

'There's a time and a place for everything!' Very often, the tone of voice in which that remark is made implies, 'And it's neither here nor now!'

The beginning of Mark's gospel is full of references to time and place. The verses which we have just heard are crammed with examples; 'At that time ... from Nazareth in Galilee ... in the Jordan ... As Jesus was coming up out of the water ... At once ... into the desert ... for forty days ... After John was put in prison ... into Galilee ... the time has come'. Mark is at pains to stress that, unlike the mystery religions that abounded at the time in the eastern Mediterranean, Christianity is firmly rooted in both time and place. And the time and place are here and now.

So, as we begin another Lent, what exactly are we doing – here and now – to strengthen our faith? How does our lifestyle proclaim the values of the kingdom into which we have been baptised? Christian stewardship does not pretend to have all the answers – but it offers some pointers to set us on the right road.

## **B - The Second Sunday of Lent**

"I'm 87", said the voice on the other end of the 'phone, "and I thought it was about time to get round to making a Will. I'd like to leave a legacy to my village church, but I want to be sure the diocese can't get their hands on it. If I do, they won't lose it all in Quota, will they?" I was able to reassure him that, in this diocese, legacies are not taken into account when calculating a parish's liability, and he was quite happy for them to be assessed on the income should they choose to invest it. So one day – although naturally I hope it won't be too soon – a PCC Treasurer will have a pleasant surprise.

We leave all sorts of things to our descendants. Our looks – for good or ill; in some cases a tendency to particular illnesses; the bundle of reactions and neuroses that result from our skill or otherwise as parents. Abraham must have wondered what he would have to leave, and to whom, when he sat, a childless old man, at the door of his tent that afternoon. I suspect that even in his wildest dreams, he could never have foreseen what the outcome would be almost 4,000 years later.

Jesus leaves to his disciples a share in his cross. He invites them to join him in an exploration of what it means to live by the values of his kingdom in a fallen world. It means approaching life as a gift, not as something that has to be earned, or justified; he invites his disciples to play like children with his grace, not to keep it locked away as something fragile to be preserved. He gives us 'an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade' – and one, which we are invited to share with those, we meet.

## **B - The Third Sunday of Lent**

The story is told that, when the first missionaries reached a certain eastern court, they asked permission to speak to the people. The king asked his chief adviser to prepare a report on whether the new teaching should be allowed. When, three weeks later, he submitted the report, it contained the single word, 'Carrots'. 'Explain yourself', commanded the king. 'Well, your majesty, you would never guess from the surface that there is gold hidden beneath; you have to dig to find it; and there are a great many donkeys associated with it!'

Paul proclaims himself among the donkeys. 'The foolishness of the cross' is at the heart of his teaching. He reminds the Christians in Corinth that they were called, not from the wise, the influential, the nobly born, but from predominantly the artisan and slave classes. It was with such people that God planned to turn the world upside-down. Bishop Jack Nicholls once said, "I would have been the best vicar in the world if only God had given me the people I deserved in my parish. I had to learn that God only works through wonky people.'

Christian stewardship is a call to be among God's 'wonky people'; people who have a bias towards holiness and are prepared to run counter to the grain of society and to challenge the unthinking assumptions in a market-orientated, consumerist world. The cleansing of the temple, today's Gospel, is a reminder that it can be all too, even within the church, to accept

the status quo: 'This is the way it is done; this is the way it has always been done; this is the way it has to be done.' 'Wonky people' aren't always comfortable to have around; they can be disruptive. Sometimes they end up being crucified. But dig deeper, and you may well find the gold of the Kingdom.

## ***B - The Fourth Sunday of Lent                      Mothering Sunday***

Many years ago now, in my spare time, I worked as a Special Constable. One evening, I was on duty at a firework display, attended by about 12,000 people. In the crowd, Simon, who was about three, became separated from his parents. You might imagine that restoring him would take some time and effort – in fact, it took less than three minutes. Having calmed him down, I sat him on my shoulders and asked him to look for his parents. Of course, he couldn't see them – but once he was above the crowd, they could see him, and within a few seconds, his mother had covered the dozen yards that separated them and he was restored to his family.

I sometimes use this as a model for intercessory prayer. Of course we don't need to hold people up so that God can 'see' them; but the act of doing so brings them more firmly to our own attention. Even a three year old is an appreciable weight after a couple of minutes!

Stewardship invites us to reconsider exactly what it is we are 'lifting up' to God. It reminds us that our faith can never rest at the purely individual level – 'God so loved me', true though that is. 'God so loved the kosmos', wrote John; what is to be redeemed is the whole created order. 'God so loved ... that he gave'; our prayer should lead us to action in response to that love.

## ***B - The Fifth Sunday of Lent***

My grandfather used to be something of an expert at dominoes. He'd play against anybody; young or old, novice or fellow expert, it made no difference. I think only gardening exceeded it as a passion. And he used to say that dominoes was the most Christian game he knew. Most games depend on building up a winning hand, on doing better than other people; but in dominoes, you could only win with an empty hand; when you'd given everything away. That was the whole point of the game; to finish up with nothing!

'The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life', said Jesus. And the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds his readers that it was not by claiming privileges but through obedience to the will of his heavenly Father that Jesus became the source of salvation. 'Where I am, my servant will also be'; to follow Jesus is to take up the cross.

Christian stewardship is a call to sit light to the things of this world; to take our rôle as servants seriously, following the pattern of our master; to play the game as if it really mattered, so that we stand with empty hands, waiting for Jesus to fill them.

## ***B - Palm Sunday***

'The human race, to which so many of my readers belong', Chesterton wrote, in an unusually jaundiced moment. If we're honest, there are times when we all feel like that, unless we're particularly well advanced on the path to sainthood! 'There is', someone once said, 'only one problem with humanity; it's made up of people.' And in today's Gospel, we meet them all; the humble and the proud, the arrogant and the submissive, the brilliant and the unperceptive, the self-serving and the generous, the coward and the brave. And because they're all there, we see ourselves; not just as individuals, but in relation to Jesus.

'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus', wrote Paul. He hammers home the distinction we see for ourselves in the Gospel. Wherever we see ourselves falling short of the model Jesus presents, we are to seek God's grace to become more like him.

Jesus, 'being in very nature God, did not consider equality with god something to be grasped...' wrote Paul. As we reflect on the events of Holy Week, perhaps we should ask ourselves whether, and why, we cling so fiercely to what is 'ours'. The evening before this was written, I got in from a meeting with a PCC and turned on the TV. There, I was confronted

by a man alleging, quite fiercely, that he 'paid his taxes to provide health and education for his family, not for a load of free-booting asylum seekers.' In some parishes, people threaten to reduce their giving if the PCC, or the Vicar, proposes a course of action of which they don't approve. What are we called to give up in order to model ourselves more fully on Jesus?

## ***B - The Second Sunday after Easter***

It has been said that the fundamental question of physics has moved on from asking 'Why are things as they are?' to 'Why is there anything at all?' Quantum theory makes the very nature of matter the subject of debate. Compared with the space and energy inside the atom, the physical universe appears transitory and insubstantial.

'These things are written', says John, 'that you may believe ... and have life.' He hasn't recorded all he has heard and seen; but he believes that what he has provided will enable his readers to reach their own conclusions. However, this is not just a once-and-for-all event. Our Epistle indicates that it is an ongoing process; we are to walk in the light.

Christian Stewardship is part of this process. 'Walking in the light' includes the moral and ethical use of our resources to build up the Body of Christ and help bring his kingdom to light within the world. Walking with our eyes fixed on Jesus frees us from an unnecessary concern with what so often preoccupies the minds of those who are 'in the world'; instead, we are able to live, and to give, generously.

## ***B - The Third Sunday after Easter***

In a wonderful moment in one of Terry Pratchett's 'Discworld' novels, Death, (an anthropomorphic personification), muses on the virtues of camomile. He has just discovered that it can be made into both soap and a tea; 'clean both inside and out', he reflects.

'You are witnesses of these things', Jesus told his disciples. Meditating on this theme of witnessing, the author of our Epistle concludes that it is the vocation of the Christian to be a witness and celebrant of the greatness of the love of God. 'What we will be has not yet been made known, he says, 'But we know that when he appears we shall be like him'. Our transformation will be complete; inside and out.

There is currently something of a vogue for 'makeover' programmes – houses, cars, and even people's appearances. But no matter what is done superficially, the essential structure remains the same. Sometimes, this is a matter of chance – architects recently discovered that a thirteenth century shop in Berkhamstead only remained standing because the adjoining properties held it up after an enthusiastic, but misguided, Victorian developer cut through the main timbers of the cruck frame to install a staircase! The 'makeover' of the Holy Spirit is rather more thorough – but without damaging the essential integrity of our personality. One expression of this is the extent to which our lives show the loving generosity that lies at the heart of God himself.

## ***B - The Fourth Sunday after Easter***

On a road I used to drive regularly when I lived in Wales, sheep were a constant hazard. The top of the mountain consisted of a couple of thousand hectares of open grazing, across which they wandered at will. It wasn't usually too bad in the day; the worst times were on summer nights, when they lay in the middle of the road to benefit from the heat stored in the tarmac. And if you ever want to test your eyesight, try spotting a grey sheep standing in the middle of the road in thick fog! The local farmers accepted the loss of the occasional sheep to traffic as part of the price they paid for using the land, and accidents were most frequent in Spring, before the new lambs had learned their Green Cross code.

But, just occasionally, it was the other way round. I was talking to a policeman about a nasty accident a few days before, when a woman had swerved to avoid a sheep, hit the bank, and was injured when her car rolled over. It had been the fourth accident in three weeks, but the only one to cause injuries to anyone – all the other casualties had been sheep. 'It was sheer instinct', he said; 'If she'd kept going, the sheep would probably have got out of the

way, but she swerved before she had time to think. Quite the good shepherd, wasn't she?'

Well, no, actually. There's a big difference between the instinctive reaction and the deliberately chosen path. When Jesus speaks of himself as 'the good shepherd' he is not commending sentimental woolly thinking. Shepherds, like fishermen, were often regarded as 'law-breakers'; their work often made it impossible to keep the strict demands of the Torah. To a strict Pharisee, a 'good shepherd' was an oxymoron.

Today's Epistle explores this theme further. We are to become like the 'good shepherd'; one whose power is shown through weakness and whose love is revealed through suffering. We are to surrender our own interests to the needs of others. Our giving, of our time, our skills and our money are to be without limit, reflecting the reckless generosity at the heart of God.

## ***B - The Fifth Sunday after Easter***

I freely admit that I'm not the world's greatest gardener. I leave all the clever stuff to my wife; I'm just the labourer for the heavy jobs. And my wife belongs to the gardening school that believes that the only essential tool is a pair of secateurs. 'When in doubt, prune it' is her motto. Admittedly, there are times when it's helpful. We once bought a house with a number of heavily overgrown fruit trees in the garden, and shortened their branches by some 20 or 30 feet. We subsequently found friends fleeing from us as we tried to give away bags of apples and pears – we had far more than we could ever eat!

However, pruning vines is a more difficult task. The fruiting shoots grow on the previous years wood, and only careful selection of which shoots are selected will ensure a continuous series of good crops. Otherwise, you finish up with very few grapes for a number of years. It's not just a case of cutting out the dead wood!

I believe that one of the things that needs pruning in many of our churches is fear. Listening to some PCCs, there is an undercurrent of quiet despair; 'Our congregations are so small and so elderly; we just don't have the resources any more; people just don't seem interested in the church; there are so many things that compete. What is going to happen to us?'

'Perfect love', wrote St John, 'casts out fear.' Fear clings to what it knows, demands security and certainty. Love trusts; love embraces the unknown, and can live with uncertainty. It has patience to wait for the new growth, and welcomes the change that often accompanies it. It enables a local congregation to bear the fruit of the gospel as it is changed, and is ready to use, rather than to hoard, its resources.

## ***B - The Sixth Sunday after Easter***

At lunchtime, before I sat down to write this study, in the middle of Gloucester there was a peace protest against the coming war with Iraq. Some 60 or 70 school children were sitting in a silent circle, holding placards, at the Cross – the centre of the old Roman town. Then I came back, and read the words of our Epistle: 'This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.'

Our society is dominated by the idea of dominance. We speak, for example, of 'the conquest of space' – but space is not conquered; it merely tolerates us under very limited and artificial conditions. David Scott-Blackhall once remarked that 'you do not 'conquer' a mountain – you stand on the summit and call it a draw.' But we demand a solution to every problem, a cure for every illness; we demand 'life, liberty and happiness', not as something to be pursued, but as something to possess at all times and under all circumstances.

Christian Stewardship, too, is about conquest – but of a very different kind, the kind that lies at the heart of the gospel. 'Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends', said Jesus. The call of stewardship is part of the call to fulfilment through surrender. We are called to conquer nothing and no one except ourselves, and this only by the life of Christ growing within us, so that we remain in his love and fulfil his commands.

## **B - The Seventh Sunday after Easter**

'This isn't for me; it's for the whole team.' How often has someone, at an award ceremony, said something similar? In so many areas of life, the achievement of one person depends on the efforts behind the scenes of others, who contribute to their success. In so many areas, without the work of technicians, support staff, researchers, the whole project would grind to a halt.

'Glory has come to me through them', said Jesus. Frightening words, aren't they? It seems we are called to live with fact that it is our lives, our actions that contribute to the glory of Christ. We are the backroom girls and boys who contribute to the work of building up Christ's kingdom. And most of the time, it is done in very prosaic ways. The selection of Matthias as the replacement apostle was hardly in accordance with the best management techniques (although I sometimes wonder how many managers use something similar in practice! There is a technique for decision making that says, 'Toss a coin. If you have any regrets about how it comes down, make the opposite choice!')

'He who has the Son has life' wrote St John. It is how we live that life, how our decisions are worked out day by day, that is our contribution to the work of the whole 'team'. We can build Christ's kingdom, or we can delay its coming. Christian stewardship is an invitation to reconsider our role, the contribution we are called to play, so that Jesus can say, 'It isn't just for me; it's for the whole team.'

## **B - Pentecost**

Here, at the heart of Jesus high priestly prayer, we find a kernel of stewardship. The Holy Spirit is the means by which the things of God are shared within the Church. 'All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.' We can, perhaps, begin to understand how all that is the Father's can be Christ's; but how do we fully grasp that all that is Christ's can be available to us for his mission in the world?

Christian Stewardship is the celebration of our riches, both individually and corporately. It is how we work out the implications of Paul's wonderful declaration the nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord. To say that 'Jesus is Lord' is have made available to us all that we need to fulfil the mission to which he calls us.

Our gifts are given, says Jesus, to bring glory to him. We do this best by offering them back to him, through the service of others and through the church.

## **B - Trinity Sunday**

'What is God like?' How do you answer that perfectly reasonable question from a young child? Some of the greatest minds of the last few millennia have concluded that at best they can describe God only in negative terms – by stating what he is not. And while philosophically this may be satisfactory, one effect of this is create a climate in which many people feel that God has become increasingly remote.

The best illustration of the Trinity that I know involves looking in a mirror. There you will see the 'you' that anyone can discover, simply by looking; the 'you' who communicates a purpose through words and actions; and the 'you' whose inner life can never be fully known, even by yourself. Yet gazing back out of the mirror there is, indisputably, only one 'you'.

The same is true of every church. Anyone can see who the church is – or so they think. Each church communicates its values through its words and actions, with varying effectiveness. And each church is motivated, not only by its declared 'mission statement', but by a whole raft of influences from its past, present and future, some of which may be deeply hidden.

Stewardship, by encouraging people to identify what they can bring to the mission of the church, can help in looking at the dynamics of the life of the Eucharistic community, and making the communication of its mission more effective.

## **B - Proper 7**

### **Sunday between 19 – 25 June**

I know some of you have heard the story of the two men on a cruise liner that sank, who were washed up together on a small sandy reef. The first sat smiling on the beach, while the second set off to search for supplies. Ten minutes later he was back. 'There's no food and no water', he announced; we're going to die!' 'I earn £2 million a year', said the first man. The second man set off again, and returned after a further ten minutes. 'There isn't even enough wood to build a raft to escape!' he said. 'In a few days we're going to die horribly!' The first man continued smiling, and repeated, 'I earn £2 million a year.' 'And what good is that?' the first man asked. 'You can't take it with you, you know!' 'I earn £2 million a year, and I give a tenth of everything I earn to my church', came the answer. 'My vicar will come looking for me!'

'We put no stumbling-block in anyone's path', Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth. Christian stewardship is about integrity and authenticity; about living a life that matches up with what we say and sing week by week. Paul describes how his offering of time and talents has been dedicated to the mission of the church, out of his love for the Corinthians, and, even more importantly, his love for Christ. He invites them to match him in their response, and to show the same generosity in their lives. It is a message that we, no less than they, need to hear, amid the storms that surround us.

## **B - Proper 9**

### **Sunday between 3 – 9 July**

Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul reflects on 'power made perfect in weakness'. He'd tried working from a position of strength during his 'Pharisee phase', and knew only too well what resulted. Paul has learned that the ship of the church may have a figurehead on the front; but power and steering comes from the other end, and is usually under water and unseen.

There are times when the church seems to be obsessed with its own strength, safety and security. Falling numbers, rising costs – it sounds, to some, like a recipe for disaster. But not to all. 'We seek what we believe God is calling us to as his mission for our parish at this time', said one vicar, 'and he's never yet failed to provide what we need – even when we didn't know where it was coming from when we set out.'

All too often, stewardship can carry overtones of careful hoarding, rather than risky living. We need to rediscover 'power made perfect in weakness', the strength that comes from relying on god, rather than on our own resources. Unless we are open in this way, we find our hands are so full that we cannot take hold of the gifts god offers us.

## **B - Proper 10**

### **Sunday between 10 – 16 July**

'I need to know', said the vicar, 'what are the qualities of a good leader?' 'There's only one', I said; 'they've got followers. Otherwise all they're leading is themselves into a delusion.'

Herod had no idea what he was following at his birthday banquet. Like most weak people, he was fascinated by the strength and certainty of a man like John. As has been observed, the jailer is the prisoner's prisoner; and, unwillingly, and in a perverted way, Herod has become one of John's followers. And then matters come, quite literally, to a head. Trapped by his twisted sense of honour, and unable to scheme his way out of an unwelcome commitment, he orders John's execution. He exchanges what was perhaps one of the few meaningful relationships in a life of political intrigue for something, ultimately, of no worth.

In contrast, Paul reminds the Christians at Ephesus of the benefits they are heirs to in Christ. In their relationship with him, they receive all God's goodness lavished upon them. He will go on to develop this theme in terms of its consequences for how they are to live. But, right from the start, it is to be the response of love to Love, worked out within that

relationship. This is no less true of the stewardship each one of us is called to exercise today.

## ***B - Proper 11***

### ***Sunday between 17 – 23 July***

‘It was so peaceful’ a friend said, on their return from holiday. ‘We scarcely saw another soul.’ I have to admit, it’s the kind of holiday location I enjoy, too. And it’s in marked contrast with the picture of the life of Jesus that Mark gives us in today’s Gospel. So busy that there’s no time to eat, constantly followed by the crowds – it only need the invention of the mobile phone and the paparazzi to complete the picture of the modern celebrity.

For many people, one of today’s problems is busyness. We can identify much more readily with this frenetic picture than we can with our epistle, which refers to Jesus as the creator of our peace. The church must bear its part in the guilt for this; we sometimes give the impression that the only good Christian is a busy Christian! It’s not unusual, as part of a stewardship campaign, for a parish, or an individual, to stand back and ask, ‘Why do we do this? And why do we do it this way?’ It can be good to try to measure, not input, but output; to ask, ‘What does this actually achieve for the kingdom of God?’

How we use our time is a crucial part of our stewardship; and in particular, how we use our quality time. We need to be busy about important things; about those things that reflect both the values and the peace of the kingdom.

## ***B - Proper 12***

### ***Sunday between 24 – 30 July***

Today’s Gospel is a story of different agendas: the agendas of Philip, the practical man; of the crowd, eager for a revolutionary leader; of the frightened disciples on a stormy lake at night; and of Jesus, who knows what he has in mind to do, not only for a hungry crowd, but for all who turn to him.

It is this last agenda to which Paul refers, in his prayer for the Christians at Ephesus, as he asks that Christ may strengthen them with power out of his glorious riches, and fill them to the measure of God’s own fullness.

One of the questions posed by our consideration of our stewardship is the extent to which we have the mind of Christ. To live and work in accordance with his will is to know ourselves supported and resourced by that rich goodness, even in the face of circumstances that threaten to overwhelm us. To have any other agenda, no matter how plausible or attractive, is ultimately to face failure.

## ***B - Proper 13***

### ***Sunday between 31 July – 6 August***

‘Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.’ Not the words of the latest diet guru, but of the French gastronome Brillat-Savarin, well over a century ago. A walk along any high street in the country will show the truth of that statement; we live in a world in which obesity-related diseases are becoming the most common cause of death.

Paul speaks of the healthy church, fed by the Spirit, in which each part grows to maturity and makes its full contribution to the life of the Body. This happens, he says, when each member cultivates the gift given by grace, and so feeds and supports the rest of the Body. One of the questions stewardship sometimes asks is ‘What is your church’s diet like? Are you malnourished? Are some starving while others are gorged? How does each person make her or his full contribution?’

Jesus reminded his hearers of the kind of diet that would sustain them into his Father’s kingdom. In describing himself as ‘the bread of life’, he declares that it as his life is found in his disciples that this nourishment of the church will occur. It is for this reason that Christian Stewardship is sometimes described as ‘What I do after I say, ‘I believe’.

## **B - Proper 14**

### **Sunday between 7 – 13 August**

'Listen very carefully, because I can tell you this only once; I promised faithfully that I would never repeat it!' What follows such words is not always the truth; and you can almost always be certain that it is not spoken in love!

Even God finds it hard to be limited by words – witness the struggles of the prophets to interpret him to their people. No wonder the growth of the vision of God was so slow. And so, finally, God accepts the limitations, not merely of language, but of time, space, and common humanity. The Word become flesh, and dwells among us. He becomes the living bread, transforming our everyday lives into the life of heaven. He speaks the truth in love.

This is the model Paul challenges us to follow with him. We are to live in such a way that our lives, our giving of ourselves, sustains and transforms others. We are to show the love of Christ. We are to live, not as owners, but as stewards of the life of Jesus within us.

## **B - Proper 15**

### **Sunday between 14 – 20 August**

'Now then,' said the Sunday School teacher, 'can any of you tell me what animals might have been in the stable when Jesus was born?' George's hand was the first to go up. 'Please, Miss, a whale!' he said. 'A whale, George! Why do you think there would have been a whale?' 'Well, Miss, it's what we sing – A whale in a manger!'

We can probably all remember mishearing that led to childhood misunderstandings. As a very young child, I used to have nightmares about a complicated kind of trap known as a 'plicity'; and I felt so sorry for all the mice trapped in it! Only when I learned to read did I discover it was actually 'Pity my simplicity!'

'Be very careful how you live', Paul advised the Christians at Ephesus. 'Always give thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.' A little over twenty five years ago, I was finding things pretty tough; they began to improve when I stopped praying, 'Lord, why is this happening?' and began to pray, 'Lord, what do you want me to learn from this?' Gradually, complaint changed to thanksgiving.

It can be easy to exercise stewardship out of our riches; to give from affluence, from talents that are recognised and appreciated, from time we can spare. It is much harder to give out of poverty; when we are under pressure, when other people crowd in on us, when we feel unappreciated, when there are just too many demands, when there seems to be nothing for which to give thanks. It is at times like this that we particularly need to be aware of being fed by the bread from heaven; to understand that it is often in our poverty and vulnerability that we find Christ closest to us.

## **B - Proper 17**

### **Sunday between 28 August – 3 September**

Nasrudin was asked to take nine donkeys to market. He counted them as they set off from the farm. As the day was hot, after a while he grew tired, and decided to ride. After a while, he decided to check their number, and to his horror, discovered there were only eight. He leapt off, lined them up, counted them again, and was relieved to find the ninth had returned. And so his journey continued – whenever he rode, a donkey disappeared, but as long as he walked, they were all there. Eventually, he returned, and the farmer asked him how he had got on. 'Very well,' said Nasrudin, 'once I had learned the tricks of donkeys!'

'Learning the tricks of donkeys' is part of what stewardship is about. It invites a change of perspective into how we live, and asks us to place it alongside the standards of the gospel. As Jesus comments in today's reading from Mark, it's all too easy to make assumptions that we arte in control, and that as long as we meet certain standards, certain obligations, there is nothing further we need to worry about. In one parish recently, the PCC were discussing

whether 5% or 10% was the appropriate challenge to put before the congregation in a stewardship campaign. They were, of course, debating which donkey to ride! The challenge that stewardship offers is to look into 'the perfect law that gives freedom'; and then to walk in its way.

## ***B - Proper 18***

### ***Sunday between 4 – 10 September***

Today's Epistle has a wonderfully modern ring to it. When I re-read it, I was immediately reminded of my first encounters with the writings of Oscar Romero – 'You are insulting the poor and being exploited by the rich'. Heady stuff! Except, of course, this isn't what James is saying.

It's only human – one might say all too human – to divide the world into 'us' and 'them'. And of course, 'we' are always the good guys. But not according to James. He shows that it doesn't matter where I fall short of the Law of Charity. To fail in one respect is to fail in all. And as soon as I make that distinction between myself and another – and it makes no difference whether I regard him as inferior or superior – I have breached the Law of Love. I have ceased to regard him as a neighbour.

For many people, Christian Stewardship is one of the key ways in which this issue can be approached. In asking people to think about their stewardship, we are asking questions about values, status, priorities. We are saying, 'What is it that makes you human? Is it the things that 'the world' counts as important, or is it what God has given you? And how do you live in such a way that other people can see the truth of this? As James reminds us, 'faith without deeds is useless.'

## ***B - Proper 19***

### ***Sunday between 11 - 17 September***

Did you know that the tongue is the strongest muscle in the body? Just look at how many bricks it can drop! And, as we all know from experience, it's far easier to talk ourselves into trouble than out of it!

'Who do people say I am?' Jesus asked his disciples – and then, 'But what about you? Who do you say I am?' It's a question he still puts to his disciples today. And so we need to think carefully about our response, and how well it matches with our actions.

There's a great deal of Peter in many of us. Our tongues run way ahead of the rest of us. For to declare that Jesus is the messiah is to be committed to his agenda, the building of his Father's kingdom, rather than our own programme. And part of that commitment is our willingness to make our resources, of time, talents and treasure, available for his work. If the hands that reach into our pockets at the offertory were as strong as our tongues, who can tell what our church might be able to achieve!

## ***B - Proper 20***

### ***Sunday between 18 - 24 September***

'Well', said the Vicar to her Reader as they returned to the vestry at the end of the service, 'that was the best sermon on humility I've ever preached!' and if you're tempted to smile, ask yourself what you mean when you talk about 'humility'.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Jesus picked on children when he wanted a model for his disciples was the fact that what we so often refer to as humility has to be learned – and very young children haven't yet acquired it! Children are the experts at 'telling it like it is' – often to the embarrassment of their parents!

Children know they are dependant – even when they misestimate their capabilities. They are not afraid to ask for help – or to offer it. Every parent knows that a five-minute job will take half an hour when a child offers to 'help'! Children tend to live in the present, and to accept

the world on trust. Tell them there's a pot of gold at the rainbow's end, and they'll happily set off to look for it. They live with their hands open, rather than their fists clenched.

Humility and generosity have a lot in common. A truly humble person, like a truly generous person, is not concerned with their own status; only with the quality of life they can offer to others.

## ***B - Proper 21***

### ***Sunday between 25 September – 1 October***

'It wasn't what she said; it was the tone of voice in which she said it!' I applied liberal seasoning to my unspoken thoughts; Liz was a professional victim, and could find major offence in a cheerful 'Good morning!' And when it came to casting stones, she could be an avalanche all on her own.

And so we continued exploring strategies that might help her feel she could take control of her life again, and begin to restore her sense of self-worth. It was a slow journey, but a year or so later, Liz was a bright, and apparently confident young woman who had learned to confront her fears so that they no longer terrified her as they had before.

Something very similar often happens during a Stewardship campaign. People begin to consider, 'What am I worth?' 'What is the motive behind my life?' Our society, and so, sometimes, our churches, have many people who don't know who they are; and in spite of what they say and sing week after week, don't see themselves as uniquely loved and cherished by God. It is as this realisation gradually dawns that they respond with astounding generosity. Their delight in giving begins to mirror that of God.

## ***B - Proper 22***

### ***Sunday between 2 – 8 October***

'Bill and Jenny had been happily married for six months. That had been twenty years ago.' An old joke, and, sadly, one that's true of all too many marriages. According to the Book of Common Prayer, following Mark, Jesus seems to have viewed marriage in the same light as the new creation – blessed by God, but not yet perfected in the human sense, the only sense in which we can know it. Certainly, that was the approach taken by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews.

So our stewardship has a much wider context than we sometimes imagine. Yes, of course it includes our time, talents and treasure – but when did you last reflect of the stewardship of relationships; of the importance for the Christian of taking seriously, not only marriage (for those who are married), but friendships, workplace relationships, how our church relates to the community it serves? I think it was Virginia Wolff who said, 'I have lost many friends – some by death, others by a simple inability to cross the street.'

'Receiving the kingdom of God like a little child' is a clue. Children see through our adult pretence to what is real – the emperor's new clothes do not impress them. And when a child throws their arms round a grandparent neck, gives them a kiss and says, 'I love you', you can be sure that you have a glimpse of that kingdom.

## ***B - Proper 23***

### ***Sunday between 9 – 15 October***

The story of the rich young ruler is perhaps of one of the most misunderstood in the gospels. Sometimes, it is taken to indicate the level of giving to which every church member should aspire! But to say this is to miss the point.

The young man's problem is not his wealth, but his conscience. He's a morbidly scrupulous individual, wrapped up in a concern for his own soul. 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He is living a life in which affluence frees from the sort of routine responsibilities that concern most of us. His need is to be taken out of himself and put in touch with the real world.

Jesus' challenge to him is to enter this real world. 'Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' Anything less will leave him with same question he has put to Jesus at the beginning of this encounter; 'How can I be sure that I have done enough?'

We sometimes face the same issue over our own stewardship. Should I give five per cent, ten per cent, or, as the Bishop of Birmingham has recently suggested, twenty per cent? Our Epistle reminds us that the assessment of our generosity is made in the light of the word by the living Word. Our judge and our saviour are one.

## ***B - Proper 24***

### ***Sunday between 16 – 22 October***

'Give some people an inch and they think they're rulers' was one of my father's regular sayings. James and John are clearly among this group, earmarked, in their opinion, for the fast track to the top. Jesus tells them that, before they allow their ambition to run away with them, they should look at what's at the top of the ladder.

When the story of the exchange leaks out – and such stories always do! – the other disciples want to jump on the band-wagon. At this point Jesus issues a severe warning. 'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant'. In his father's kingdom, the hierarchy is based on giving, not getting.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews explores this as he explores the nature of Jesus' own priesthood. He reflects on the way in which Jesus 'learned obedience', refusing to assert the privileges of a Son.

This is the model for the Christian today. The form that service will take may differ; in a cash economy, money will form a far greater part of what we sacrifice. But the principle is the same.

## ***B - Proper 25***

### ***Sunday between 23 – 29 October***

Many years ago, a couple of German tourists were travelling on a London bus. The husband wanted to smoke his pipe, and so went upstairs; his wife felt tired by the day's sightseeing, and chose to go downstairs. When the conductor came round, she realised to her horror that she had lost her purse. She fished in her pocket for her phrasebook, and hastily tried to translate, 'My husband is upstairs'. However, what actually came out was, 'The Lord is above!' 'That's as may be', replied the conductor, 'but you've still got to pay your fare!'

Translation can be difficult. What do we hear in that cry of Bartimaeus, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' What we ought to hear is not some dry, legalistic forgiveness, but the rich overflowing of sacrificial love. 'Kyrie eleison'; Lord, pour out on me the richness, the healing, of your presence. Let it be like the flow of olive oil in the anointing of your kings and prophets of old; a sign of your love and grace. For Bartimaeus, the richness is the restoration of his sight, and Mark tells us that his response, in love and gratitude, was that he 'followed Jesus along the road'. He moved from begging in blindness to following Jesus in blind faith.

The call to each of us in our stewardship is to share in this process; to be willing to go beyond what is reasonable, and share in the extravagant response of love to love. We, too, are called to live in 'blind faith' in the ability of God to meet our needs.

## ***B - Last Sunday after Trinity if observed as Bible Sunday***

'I can tell when you're lying!' he said. 'Your lips move!' Not that there was anything malicious in Jim's stories; I think he just found it easier to live in a fantasy world, and made only minimal contact with reality. But it did make him a very unreliable witness when his inattention got him into trouble, as happened fairly frequently.

Witnesses, of course, vary in quality. A large part of the pleasure in a detective story is

working out who's telling the truth, who believes they are telling the truth, but is misguided, and who's lying.

Paul reminds Timothy that he has two strands of evidence; the scriptures that he has known since childhood, and the lives of those who have taught him. The same is still true today. Unless the scriptures - in our case, the New Testament as well as the Old - are backed up by the evidence of the lives of those who claim to follow them, they will be largely disbelieved, or at best regarded as irrelevant. Our stewardship is a challenge to apply, in our daily lives, the qualities of loving generosity, in our relationships, our dealings with others, and our sacrificial giving of ourselves, that we see in the God revealed in the scriptures.

## ***B - The Fourth Sunday before Advent***

Nasrudin was stopped one day by a policeman. 'I'm afraid I shall have to report you, sir; you've just driven through a red light.' 'That's quite all right, officer', replied Nasrudin; 'but when I get to court, I shall ask them to take into account the number of times I've stopped, even though the light was green!'

It's an argument that is, fundamentally, at the same level as debating the relative importance of the commandments. Jesus refuses to be drawn; he quotes Deuteronomy and Leviticus to his questioner, almost as though he is embarrassed to be asked such an elementary question. But he does so with a small, but significant, modification. Deuteronomy makes no reference to 'mind'; that is Jesus own addition. Perhaps it was a sly way of rebuking his questioner!

Long before Jesus, Jewish commentators had wrestled with the meaning of this text. They had no difficulty with loving God with 'heart' and 'soul', but 'strength' caused them a few problems. One school eventually decided that it could be interpreted as 'wealth', or 'money'. so perhaps we're not stretching things too far to see this as an encouragement by Jesus to his disciples to use their minds in their handling of wealth, as we, following the injunction in today's Epistle, 'serve the living God'.

## ***B - The Third Sunday before Advent***

'I remember the Armada' says Lord Burleigh in Brahms and Simon's 'No Bed for Bacon'. 'But that was fifty years ago', comes the reply. 'Ah! When you reach my age, it is not what you remember, but the fact that you remember anything at all that is important', Burleigh remarks sadly.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds his readers in today's Epistle of the significance of the ascension of the risen Christ. 'Remember', he says to a persecuted church, 'what has already happened. Live like those who are ascended with Christ, and already know the life of heaven with him. Leave behind the repetitive patterns of your old life.'

It's the same call as that which we hear in the Gospel; 'Follow me!' We are stewards, not merely of the things of earth, but of the things of heaven, of the inexhaustible love of God.

## ***B - The Second Sunday before Advent***

There are some people who always read the last few pages of a detective novel first. Of course they enjoy the plot; but they can't rest until they know 'who done it'. Personally, I prefer to work it out as I go along.

Peter, James, John and Andrew were clearly among those who need certainty about the future. It's not enough to know what is going to happen; they need to know when. How can they plan for the future if it is unknown?

Except, of course, the future is always unknown. Our plans, our actions, are always based on the supposition that life will carry on as before. We make sensible provision for what we expect; but planning for the unexpected is, by definition, almost impossible - or, if it is, demands so much time and effort that it becomes counterproductive.

Jesus tells his disciples that, because they live in a created universe, they cannot escape the 'changes and chances of this fleeting world'. But this is to be, not a source of anguish,

but a reason for trust. This reason is spelled out in our Epistle, which urges the church to stand firm in the face of persecution. In the same way, how we exercise our stewardship is a measure of the reality of our faith.

## ***B - Christ the King***

### ***The Sunday Next before Advent***

“Why do I think it’s not really the Queen driving this car?” a policeman said to his patrol sergeant. ‘Because I don’t think the Queen would say, ‘Push off, copper; I’m in a hurry to get to the chippy!’ Well, I don’t know. I’ve never met the Queen, so I can’t claim to know about either her form of speech or her dietary preferences! But it illustrates how we tend to make assumptions about how people fit into their rôles.

Pilate jokes about the ragged, unlikely king standing before him; but it’s an uneasy joke. He recognises the charismatic authority of the man; an authority he seems strangely unwilling to exercise. As Frederick Buechner put it, ‘He just stands. Stands, and stands there.’ There is a sense in which, for Jesus, kingship has always been found on alien ground.

Christian stewardship is the extension of the rule of Christ into the alien ground of our lives. It is what I do after I say, ‘I believe.’ It is the practical application of saying ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ to our time, our talents and our treasure, to the glory of God the Father.

## **YEAR C**

### ***C - The First Sunday of Advent***

On Liverpool Pier Head, there used to be a poster that read, ‘What wilt thou do when the Lord cometh?’ Across the bottom, someone had written, ‘Move St John to inside forward.’ (For the young, and those not properly brought up, the Liverpool centre forward (‘striker’) at the time was Ian St John.)

Jesus warns his disciples about being ready for ‘the last days’, a popular image among many Jewish groups of his day, when God’s rule would be restored. To those who are unprepared, it will be a terrifying experience; this is why he tries to prepare them for his death and resurrection in terms he hopes they will be able to grasp.

Now jump forward a generation or so, and hear Paul writing to the church at Thessalonica. Here we have a picture of life beyond the ‘day of the Son of Man’, of a group striving to live the new life that Jesus brings. Paul has been concerned for the faith of this small, fragile group; and now Timothy has reported that all is well with them. This is not to say that there are no problems, but Paul is able to write to encourage them, and to rejoice with them in their commitment both to the Gospel and to each other.

The beginning of Advent is no bad time to review our stewardship. Are we living like those for whom Christ’s coming will bring joy, or fear?

### ***C - The Second Sunday of Advent***

A newly appointed magistrate was being taken on a conducted tour of the local court. He was eager for instruction, and at every opportunity, asked ‘What’s that for? What’s he for?’ Eventually, in the middle of a case, the Clerk of the Court stood up to offer advice to the presiding magistrates. ‘What’s he for?’ asked the young man. ‘He’s not for anything; he’s against us’ replied his guide.

John the Baptist has acquired a reputation for being ‘against’ everything and everybody – unfairly. His condemnation was for those who abused the system. And, faced with Jesus, he was the first to confess his right to supremacy. Luke clearly regards him as important; he fixes the beginning of his ministry with great precision. The gods of the contemporary mystery religions – and there were many – emerged in mythical splendour. John, and therefore Jesus, are firmly rooted in the daily world in which we all live.

It's interesting that John's teaching, recorded by Luke in the verses that follow our Gospel this morning, is all about money and possessions. He teaches the practice of simplicity, of being able to say, 'I have enough', rather than a pattern of greed, which is never satisfied. Those who seek God's kingdom need to be pilgrims, ready to travel light. As we set out this Advent, are we ready to join them?

### **C - The Third Sunday of Advent**

'The trouble with John the Baptist', someone once remarked, 'was that he influenced people without making friends.' He certainly seems to have been unacquainted with Proverbs 151!

He stands in marked contrast with the advice Paul gave the Christians at Philippi. 'Rejoice! ... Let your gentleness be evident to all ... do not be anxious ...'. It is a pattern of life that becomes possible when it is lived against a pattern of thankful praise, and that rests on the security of the peace of God.

If our churches are full of anxious people, whose lives are under constant pressure, is this a comment on our approach? Are we like the church at Philippi, or like John the Baptist? Are we more ready to condemn, or to encourage; to live at peace, or to seek conflict; to celebrate generosity, or to be grasping? Our approach to Christian stewardship is often reflected in our approach to mission.

### **C - The Fourth Sunday of Advent**

One of my favourite cartoons shows a man opening the door to an unexpected visitor. 'Well!' he exclaims, 'if it isn't my mother-in-law all the way from Australia! Have you got time for a cup of tea?' There are some visitors we are always glad to see; there are others over whom we breathe a sigh of relief as they leave, and reflect that, with any luck, we won't see them again for another year!

The visit of Mary to Elizabeth was clearly in the first category. Like her Son, she had come into the world to do God's will. In this, she stands in common with all of us. Our growth in stewardship is an expression of our own willingness to follow Christ, to set aside our own desires, our own comfort, our own security, and to follow the will of God.

### **C - The First Sunday of Christmas**

One of the lost arts of today is writing 'thank you' letters. When I was a child, almost every Christmas one small gift was a pack of especially decorative note-paper and envelopes, it my parents seemed to regard it as a point of honour that none survived into the New Year by the time I'd thanked friends and relatives for the rest of my gifts! Nowadays, we're perhaps more likely to get an email or a text message!

Writing to the Christians in Colosse, Paul reminds them of the importance of thankfulness. It is, he says, the climate in which the love of Christ grows and is expressed, and in which the fruits of the Spirit flourish.

But we need to learn how to let this develop. Even Jesus, as he began to become aware of his relationship with his Father, was awkward about it. He sees it in conventional terms; 'being 'in my Father's house'' means being in the Temple. It took almost twenty years for that simplistic interpretation to grow into the vision of his father's life and work that underpinned his adult mission. We, too, need to grow in our understanding if our stewardship, our thanksgiving, is to have real meaning.

### **C - The Second Sunday of Christmas**

The story is by now quite well known that, when Darwin's ship, the 'Beagle' anchored off the coast of Patagonia, the first party ashore were worshipped as gods by the local Indian tribes. Used to nothing larger than a dug-out canoe, they were unable to see the 'Beagle' anchored a couple of hundred yards off shore, and therefore concluded that the appearance

of the party was a miracle. Only when they were rowed out to the ship, and encouraged to climb aboard, were they able to comprehend the reality of the origin of the visitors.

John, at the beginning of his Gospel, reflects on the difficulty of recognising the transcendent God in human form. It is through him, he says, that we receive grace and truth; the truth that sets us free.

It is this freedom that Paul celebrates at the beginning of his letter to the church at Ephesus. 'You are no longer your own', he writes; 'you are now God's possession.'

As God's possession, we are to live a life that overflows with the generous love of God; the same love that we have celebrated at Christmas. It is by this that we measure the standard of what we give.

## ***C - The First Sunday of Epiphany (The Baptism of Christ)***

There is a tradition in Celtic theology that the events recorded in today's Gospel give only part of the story. Luke records the baptism of Jesus; and tradition says that, because of this, all water is, in a sense, baptised. And so it is no surprise that the tradition lives on in the association of many ancient Welsh churches with 'sacred springs'.

This sense of 'the sacredness of the ordinary' is close to the heart of Christian Stewardship. It involves recognising the Spirit-filled nature of our everyday affairs. It ensures that our faith is taken out of our church on Sundays, and worked out in the routine of our Monday to Friday lives. Of course, it was, in some ways, easier to see this relationship in a slower-paced, agrarian society; perhaps one of the key factors in rediscovering it is giving a proper value to time in our own lives; of using it to create the wells from which we draw our spiritual nourishment.

'When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too.' There is no part of our life that has not already begun to undergo this process; and Jesus shares in our experience, and gives the Holy Spirit to help us grow with him.

## ***C - The Second Sunday of Epiphany***

I know I shouldn't be, but I'm sometimes surprised at just how precisely the gifts we discover in the course of planning a stewardship programme in a parish match what is needed. The parish where we held a series of suppers because we could only seat 50 in the church hall, and a member of the congregation admitted he's previously run a catering company, and met all our needs superbly; the parish where, rather than using paper, the launch 'literature' went out as a CD, and a 'fringe' member of the congregation offered to duplicate 200 copies; the young churchwarden who chaired a planning group in a way that inspired everyone to discover a motivation that led to a burst of creative growth in the parish and a congregation that grew by a third within a year.

Which isn't to say that we haven't, from time to time, had one of those 'Cana-in-Galilee' moments. But, perhaps because stewardship is a process by which the local church is encouraged to move forward together in mission, even when there has been no obvious way ahead, the necessary resources have been given. Like Paul, we have discovered afresh that 'to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good'.

Perhaps, at the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, it's good to ask whether our divisions are weakening us precisely because these gifts are being hoarded within denominational boundaries, rather than being shared. Some of the most exciting discoveries have taken place where a programme has been developed within an LEP, where there is already a commitment to sharing. All too often, the initial request arises out of 'my' churches problems; perhaps we need to see it as 'our' churches opportunities.

## ***C - The Third Sunday of Epiphany***

'Do tell me; I'm all ears!' Presumably an indication that there's no brain to remember

what's going to be said! Of course, it's usually only very small children who take such statements literally, like the little girl who asked, 'Mrs Jones, could I please have some of that middle-age spread Mummy says you've got?'

Paul's metaphor of the church as a body is a useful reminder of two points; everyone can do something, and no one can do everything. And in the church, just as in the body, not everything has an obvious, easily understood, rôle. When someone wonders what exactly contemplatives do, ask them for a quick run-down on the functions of the spleen – unless they're a doctor!

Finding and fulfilling one's function is all part of the Isaiah agenda that Jesus quotes in the passage that forms our Gospel this morning. It's a reminder that our use of our time and talents is not, primarily, a call to activity, but to being. Jesus frees us to become the people we are meant to be, so that we can make our full contribution to the growth of his kingdom.

## **C - The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany (The Presentation of Christ in the Temple)**

One of my favourite cartoons shows a man sitting on a swing, and reflecting, 'I always wanted to be a child when I grew up.' Perhaps it's the tendency most of us have to see our own childhood through rose-tinted spectacles. And it's a view of childhood that would have been totally unrecognisable to Luke. He lived in a pragmatic world; a world in which a baby was named on the eighth day because, if it survived a week, there was at least a 50/50 chance of it making it through the rest of its first year; a world where perhaps between a third and half of all children born failed to reach their fifth birthday.

Which makes those pronouncements of Simeon and Anna all the more remarkable. Anyone looking at us as an eight day old baby would have been hard put to foretell any greatness, apart from possibly a career as a Winston Churchill impersonator. And yet each of us is, in Christ, the inheritor of those words of greatness. As stewards of the gifts of Christ, we are called to bring light, peace, joy, hope in our own generation.

## **C - Proper 1 Sunday between 3 – 9 February**

Perhaps it's because I'm a child of the midlands, and grew up about as far from the sea as is possible, that I've always preferred lakes to the sea. The sea was for holidays; it was alien, exotic; a lake, a few hundred yards across, seemed a much more reasonable amount of water. The sea, stretching beyond the horizon, and alive with the influence of winds and currents, was impressive, but not for me.

The call of the first disciples took place, depending on your geography, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee or Lake Gennesaret. Which image do you prefer? The circumscribed pond, or the open sea, linked through perilous straits to the realms of icebergs, whales and hurricanes?

Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul says that what is important is not the size of your boat, but the size of your sea. '... to Peter ... to the twelve .. to five hundred ... to James ... to all the apostles ... to me'. Sometimes, it seems, God fishes with a net, indiscriminately; at other times, he's the skilful angler, playing the fish he seeks and none other. As we seek, as good stewards, to use our resources to further God's mission, let's remember that, like him, we need to be sensitive to the scale on which we work.

## **C - The Second Sunday before Lent**

'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation'. How many times have you sung that? And how many times have you then gone out of church and grumbled about the weather?

It's easy to regard God as 'King of creation' when all is serene; when we are caught up in the worship of heaven, as our Epistle depicts today. It's much more difficult when we're 'in

the thick of things', like the disciples in today's Gospel. Our Christian stewardship is the time we spend in the quiet and the glory to enable us to work out how we are going to live in the stormy days; where we know we shall find the peace we need if things are not to get on top of us.

'Where is your faith?' Jesus asked his disciples. It's the question he may well ask us as, faced with what appear to be insurmountable hurdles in committing ourselves, and our resources, to his mission, we try to hang on to what we know and have.

## **C - The Sunday next before Lent**

A week or so ago, I took a friend out to lunch. It's a couple of months since they were made redundant, and they've gone through the initial surge of anger and resentment, and the enthusiastic search for a new job, and are beginning the slide into depression and lethargy that so often sets in at this point. We sat in the pub and chatted for an hour – not particularly about their situation, but about family matters, like their daughter's imminent house move – and as we did so, they began to recover some of their old animation. As we left, I said 'au revoir' to a new person; someone whose step was lighter, and whose shoulders had lost the hunch they'd had when we met.

Transfiguration is about enabling the real nature of things to become visible. Jesus, on the Mount of Transfiguration, shows the reality of his divinity in a way that Peter, James and John can grasp. The longer version of today's Gospel seems to suggest that without this vision of the true nature of Jesus, what we are able to attempt for him may be limited and ineffective. We will be working by our own power, rather than by his.

Paul's argument in our Epistle is parallel. We are to show the unveiled image of the Christ we carry within us. Perhaps one of the most effective ways of keeping that image veiled is the be less than wholehearted in our stewardship. We need to reveal Jesus as Lord, not just of our lips, but of our time, our skills and our money.

## **C - The First Sunday of Lent**

A mother once rebuked her four-year old daughter for making yet another inappropriate comment to the visitors. 'You must think before you speak!' she said. 'But, Mummy,' came the reply, 'how can I know what I think till I see what I say?'

Paul, in today's Epistle, makes it clear that what we believe and what we say, or do, are closely linked. In Hebrew, 'dabar' can mean both 'word' and 'deed'; so what we say gives a reality that cannot be recalled to our thoughts; it makes them effective in the world. We are made in the image of God, who creates through his words, and through his Word.

So when Jesus uses words – the words of scripture – to combat the temptations in the wilderness, he is speaking as creator. He is building an alternative world-view in which society is organised in accordance with the will of his Father, rather than on the basis of egoism and self-interest. The declarations we encourage people to make at the end of a stewardship campaign need to be seen in the same light; as a creative word that seeks to build God's kingdom.

## **C - The Second Sunday of Lent**

'Me?! A pessimist?! No! I did think about being a pessimist, but decided there was no point; it would never work, anyway!'

Most of us are, fundamentally, either pessimists or optimists. On the whole, pessimists get more surprises, when things don't go wrong, but they don't enjoy them as much. Optimists, on the other hand, rarely notice their disappointments and disasters; they're always moving on to the next horizon.

I don't think Jesus was a pessimist, but at times he clearly had the cynic's ability to cut to the heart of an issue. 'Can a prophet die anywhere except at Jerusalem?' he remarked to those who advised caution in his work. And then he links the way a hen spreads her wings to gather in her chickens with the way his own arms would be spread to gather in all those who

sought to follow him. There's a difference between optimism seen through the eyes of realism and blind optimism.

It's this latter approach that Paul commends to the church at Philippi. Citizens of heaven should not be living by the standards of a passing world. Our Christian stewardship is a measure of how far we are trying to live as those citizens of heaven.

### **C - The Third Sunday of Lent**

Someone once said, 'Most people want to be delivered from temptation but would like it to keep in touch.' All of us are tempted; and, because each one of us is unique, each of us is tempted in our own particular way. When you analyse the situation, many of the disputes within the church reflect this fact; we deplore those whose temptations are not ours, but are very quick to excuse those with whom we feel more empathy.

And when disaster hits those of whom we don't approve, there's often an element of schadenfreude in our response. In today's gospel, Jesus quickly disposes of those who are rejoicing in the downfall of those who, in their eyes, so richly deserved their fate. He then gave one of his more obscure parables, the essence of which is to point out that we are all living on borrowed time, even if, like the fig tree, we are unaware of the fact.

Paul reminds the Christians at Corinth that there can be a kind of perverse spiritual pride in believing that we are uniquely tempted. 'What you experience is no more or less than other people', he says; 'and God ensures that it is not beyond what you can bear if you let him support you.' Those who fear that the demands of Christian stewardship are unreasonable perhaps need to be reminded of this, and be encouraged to meet their particular temptations.

### **C - The Fourth Sunday of Lent (Mothering Sunday)**

The parable of the Prodigal Father is so well known we all too often allow it to roll over us without really thinking. We all know it has a happy ending. And so we miss the excitement that must have kept its first hearers on the edge of their seats. Partly, this is because we usually read it without the introductory verses we heard today to set the scene.

With the tax collectors and 'sinners' on the one hand, and the Pharisees on the other, in mind, the story takes on a new dimension. For each group could have regarded the other as 'the prodigal'. The former frequently had a more Hellenised lifestyle, rather than adhering strictly to the Law; and they, in turn, sometimes regarded the Pharisees as hypocrites who followed the outward form of the Law without any concern for its underlying principles. And both were right.

We sometimes read this as a story of change. But it isn't; the younger son comes back just as arrogant and self-centred as he went away. Nor is there any change in the father's attitude; he is still as loving, as sacrificial in his approach to both his sons as at the beginning of the story. This is a story, not about change, but about constancy.

It leaves us with the question, 'Which model of constancy do we show?' Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that they are 'a new creation'; called to model the constancy in love and generosity of Christ himself. Is this true of us? Or are we still stuck in the pattern of the sons?

### **C - The Fifth Sunday of Lent**

Ali found his friend Nasrudin crawling along the street outside his house. 'What are you doing?' he enquired. 'Looking for my key - I've dropped it' said Nasrudin. Ali got down too, and joined the search. After a few minutes he asked, 'Whereabouts did you drop it?' 'Oh, inside the house', said Nasrudin, 'but I thought I'd look for it out here; there's more light.'

Many people today are in a similar position; they know they're looking for something, but often they're not sure what it is, or where to look for it. And sometimes, it's necessary to forget the easy approach and go 'into the dark'; not in any sense of inflicting difficulties on ourselves, but simply because that is where what we are seeking is to be found.

Paul writes of his experience of the fruits of this search: for him, it involved a total reappraisal of the foundation on which his life had been built, so that he now viewed what had formally been so important as 'rubbish', not worth bothering about at all. Christian stewardship is an invitation to take this process of exploration of what our own lives are built on further; to look, not for the easy answers, but the deep motivations that drive our unconscious assumptions. In so doing, we discover the key to meaning in our lives in the service of Christ.

## **C - Palm Sunday**

The hymn Paul quotes in today's Epistle is a reflection of the approach that underlies much of his teaching on the Christian life. It is, he says, not a matter of rules; it is not something that can be achieved by effort. Rather, it flows from having 'the mind of Christ': the mind that is displayed in today's Gospel.

The argument put forward is on the theme, 'What give Christ – and therefore us – status?' Paul teaches that status is recognised, and given, not demanded. The glory we give to Christ is in recognition of who he is, rather than on any human assessment of what he has done. There is neither glory nor majesty in the King of Kings who stands before Pilate, or who drags his gallows to Golgotha.

As stewards, we are faced with the question, 'What give you your status?' How do other people recognise us as kings with Christ? It is not something we can demand; it can only be recognised through integrity of the way we live. As we enter Holy Week, it is a good question to ponder as we prepare, both for good Friday, and for our meeting with our risen Lord on Easter Day.

## **C - The Second Sunday of Easter**

How do you test what is real? For human beings, the test is, surprisingly, not sight, but touch. The horror in a ghost story is of that which can be seen but not grasped. However, if you are a cat or dog, the ultimate test of reality is scent – and, presumably, a ghost would have no smell!

We see this in the story of Thomas in today's Gospel. For him too, touch is to be the test of reality; but, faced with the risen Lord, the opportunity to put Jesus to the test becomes an irrelevance. There is no longer any doubt; only worship.

The Book of the Revelation was written to encourage the same response among those early Christians who were beginning to wonder if the expected end of time was ever going to happen. Jesus has passed beyond touch; beyond the evidence of human senses; but he is still the one 'who was, and is, and is to come'. And in heaven, as on earth, the first response to the reality of his presence is worship.

Worship, at this level, is a life-transforming experience, as Peter told the members of the Sanhedrin. Our discipleship, as Christian Stewards, is an expression of how we work out the implications of our worship in our daily lives.

## **C - The Third Sunday of Easter**

'That hole's far too big!' said my grandfather, many years ago. 'Start again and dig me half a hole!' Well, one of the functions of grandfathers is to pass on such gems of wisdom as the concept of 'half a hole'. There are some areas of life where there simply are no comparatives; you can have a hole, or an unblemished surface, but never 'half a hole'.

Sadly, we don't always recognise this in other areas. There's an advert on TV in which a child is posed the conundrum, 'Do you love Daddy more, or chips?' Only when her father leans over and takes a chip does she reach her decision. And although she's far too young to realise that, philosophically, she's been faced with a choice that cannot be made – her love of Daddy and her love of chips belong in non-comparable categories – she makes us aware of the fact in her indecision. And yet it is precisely this kind of false comparison – 'You love that garden more than you love me!' – that lies between many of the breakdowns in modern

society.

'Do you love me more than these?' Jesus asks Peter in today's Gospel. It's not clear from the Greek whether 'these' refers to his fellow disciples, or the boats and fishing gear that represents his earlier life; but what is clear is that the word used for 'love', '?????' '(agape)', normally refers to a deeply motivated desire. Perhaps Jesus recognises the impossibility of the choice; his next two questions are simply, 'Do you love me?' It seems that Jesus does not want to force this kind of choice; a simple affirmation of love is all he seeks.

There is always a danger that, in our encouragement of Christian Stewardship, we try to push people into decisions based on false comparisons. The Biblical model suggests that we have no mandate to go beyond the simple question, 'Do you love me?'; and that we do so in the knowledge that to respond is to be invited to enter a deeper level of discipleship.

## **C - The Fourth Sunday of Easter**

'I didn't know what to say', Liz remarked, as we discussed the interview she'd just attended. 'They asked me to describe myself, and I wasn't sure what they expected me to say.'

Most often, we define ourselves in relationship to other people; which makes it hard to do so to a group of strangers. We aren't necessarily quite sure how they'll react. Are they asking for our personality: how we relate to the people with whom we live, or are they looking for our less intimate, working relationships?

In today's Gospel, this contrast is picked up. The religious leaders seem to see 'the Messiah' as a job description; they ask Jesus to produce the appropriate evidence that he is capable of fulfilling the rôle they expect. Jesus, on the other hand, offers a description of who he is based on his relationship with his Father.

How do we work out our Christian Stewardship? We often begin with our rôle; with the needs and aspirations of our local church. It's safe; it limits the demands that can be made on us. But if we are to grow, we need to move towards seeing it as an expression of our relationship with our heavenly Father, and as part of our response to his love. And there, there are no limits.

## **C - The Fifth Sunday of Easter**

'We can't just wallow in the past', the Churchwarden said. 'Today's church has got to be efficient and businesslike.' He's obviously read today's Epistle; which says quite clearly that heaven is not a retreat to the rural simplicity of the Garden of Eden, but a progression towards the order of urbanity. God does not simply re-create what has gone before; he creates, a new heaven and a new earth for his beloved to live in.

And so 'the new commandment' of today's Gospel is no new commandment at all, but the oldest, with the single addition of 'as I have loved you'. The new creation is the outcome, not of economics, but of love. Eden was created for two people; but the whole of saved humanity requires something even grander if it is to offer the worship that is God's due.

Peter's account before the Council of Jerusalem of the first mission audit shows the way in which the church has always had to be prepared to move towards this new, more complex form of existence, while regarding all her structures as temporary. It reminds us that we are stewards, not in the sense of preserving the past, but of holding the resources that give hope for the future. It reminds us, too, that, in the words of Julian of Norwich, whose feast we celebrated yesterday, that 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'

## **C - The Sixth Sunday of Easter**

The history of the early church as told in Acts is largely an urban story. It's set in the great cities of the Roman world; Jerusalem, Corinth, Thessalonica, Colossae, Philippi and Rome itself. And so it's perhaps no surprise that when John looks to the end of time he sees the church set in the greatest of all cities, the New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven.

The ‘many rooms’ of the Gospel require nothing less to house them.

Some years ago, I met an old Welsh farmer who had lived all his life in the same small village. His son had got engaged to a girl from Manchester, and he enquired if I’d ever been there. ‘What’s it like?’ he asked. ‘Is it as big as Carmarthen?’ ‘About twenty times bigger’ I said. ‘Ah, then; if you were in the middle, you’d have to walk a good ten minutes to see a cow, then, I reckon.’

He had no mental map to handle somewhere the size of a city of half a million or so. And I suspect that John had the same problem in trying to describe the life of heaven. Yes, as promised, he had the guidance of the Holy Spirit; but our human vision is always bounded by what we know, and filtered through our previous experience.

Our practice of Christian Stewardship is a means of using the way we handle physical things – time, skills and money – to enlarge our vision of where God is leading us. It frees us to engage with a new image of where Christ is calling his church to be, and of the part we are called to play in moving in a new direction; of growing closer to the life of heaven.

## **C - The Seventh Sunday of Easter (Sunday after Ascension)**

On holiday last year, I noticed that in the nearby village, the bus shelter had a solar-powered display giving timetable details. Out of interest, I checked when the next bus was due. Luckily, I wasn’t in a rush; it was in three days’ time! But it also told me that, if I phoned a particular number, I would get through to a local car-sharing scheme that would enable me to make my journey.

John, at the end of revelation, writes to those who are ‘waiting for the bus’ – a bus that some people are beginning to think has been cancelled. ‘Far from it’, says John; ‘it’s right on time. It’s just your reading of the timetable that’s wrong. Keep praying – even so, come, Lord Jesus.’ Perhaps he had in mind the way in which Jesus prayed that ‘all of them may be one’. While we are in time, it is easy to lose the sense of the unity of the eternal church.

And when we do so, we begin to lose our sense of stewardship. Gradually, often without realising it, we drift towards an increasingly individualistic, privatised religion. We become focused on needs, rather than generosity; and as we move further along this road, the needs become more and more restricted, until they can reach a point where one parish may even withhold part of its share of the support for the whole body because of some actual or imagined fault.

Our stewardship is implicit in Jesus’ prayer for his church; it is part of ‘being one’. It is being ready to show that in our mutual support, not just in prayer, but in every part of our life.

## **C - Pentecost**

In the early days of the American civil rights movement, James Baldwin said, ‘I will no longer listen to what you say; but I will watch very carefully what you do.’ And when you want to make yourself absolutely clear, how many times have you said, ‘Let me show you what I mean’?

‘Show us the father’, Philip asks Jesus. Hearing, he implies, is not enough; seeing is believing. And Jesus’ response is, effectively, ‘Believe the evidence of your eyes!’ Paul, in our Epistle, takes a similar line; the evidence of the presence of the Spirit is the transformed lives of those in whom he dwells.

But both seeing and hearing are conditioned by what we expect to see and hear. The account of the Day of Pentecost in Acts shows how easy it was for bystanders to mistake religious inspiration for alcoholic fervour! When Darwin’s ship, the Beagle, anchored off Patagonia, the crew were treated as gods when they went ashore. The natives had no boat bigger than a dugout canoe, and, because the Beagle was so much larger than anything they had experienced, they were unable to see it anchored offshore. Only when they were taken out and actually able to climb board did they realise that these men had not appeared miraculously without any form of transport.

Our stewardship is one of the ways in which we show the reality of our experience of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Like Peter at Pentecost, we need to be able to give an explanation of our actions; the reason why we chose to give 5%, or 10%, or 20%, or whatever is sacrificial, of our income to the church; the reason why we devote time and effort to the service of others.

## **C - Trinity Sunday**

Today's Epistle is Paul's 'Kyrie Eleison'; his hymn to the outpouring of God's blessing on his people through his gift of the Holy Spirit. Even their sufferings, he says, are a cause for rejoicing, because they are a means by which God will increase their blessing as they learn to depend more closely on him. In this, he echoes the words of Jesus in today's Gospel, when he declares that he receives glory, not in what he has, but in what he will give to his disciples.

'The grace in which we now stand' is the source of Paul's hope. It is, as he reminds his readers, not something they can ever deserve; if that were the case, it would not be grace. It is a free gift of God's generous goodness and love. This is not a vague optimism, a hope that 'something will turn up'; it is a position of confidence rooted in the very nature of God himself. It reflects the way in which the Christian shares in the whole life of the Trinity.

It is from this basis that our stewardship develops. We are called to share the generosity, the self-giving, that lies at the heart of God the Trinity. And we are enabled to do so because of the confident hope we have in the grace that is given to sustain us in our witness. It is as we share in the outpouring of love that we create the pattern of life that builds the kingdom.

## **C - Proper 6** **Sunday between 12 – 18 June**

How did Jesus and his disciples support themselves during the three years of his ministry? Some of them, for example, Matthew, could have carried the tools of their trade with them – and there was always a market for those with the skills of reading and writing – but that would scarcely apply to Peter and James, and probably not to Jesus himself. 'Carpenter' meant not just 'woodworker'; it also covered any building worker except the two specialist crafts of the stonemason and the smith, and there is no reference to the disciples going round in a dodgy van offering to tarmac people's drives with the leftovers from the previous job!

At the end of today's Gospel, Luke gives us a glimpse of the answer to that question. 'After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some of the women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases ... These women were helping to support them out of their own means.' (Luke 8 1 – 3)

From the very first – even before there was a Church – it seems that the mission of Jesus depended on the resources of the disciples of Jesus. I believe that the same principle holds today. The mission of Jesus still depends on the resources his disciples – you and me – offer for him to use.

## **C - Proper 7** **Sunday between 19 – 25 June**

In an exercise in a parish some years ago, I invited people to try to imagine themselves in the rôles of the various people who figure in this story – Jesus, the owners of the swine, the population of a nearby village, and 'Legion' himself, and then to answer two questions: 'Is one man's sanity worth 2,000 pigs?' and 'Who should bear the cost of this situation?' From this we went on to explore, 'What are the "costs" of our church becoming a centre of healing and restoration?' – considering "costs" in the widest possible sense.

Our answers reflected very much the theme of today's Epistle; being 'clothed in Christ'. 'Christ died for all; therefore all are important and valued', read a statement in one church I

visited recently. It's so easy to say the first part of this; so difficult to live out the second. But unless we do so, how is the message of the first to be heard as authentic?

Our Christian stewardship is an encouragement to grow in this kind of 'authentic living'; to validate our Gospel by our lifestyle.

## **C - Proper 8**

### **Sunday between 26 June – 2 July**

Writing to the Christians in Galatia, Paul reminds them of freedom they now enjoy in Christ. But freedom, as Paul understands it, is expressed through the ability to choose a course of action and follow it through, rather than being at the mercy of passing impulses. This freedom is to be modelled on that of Jesus, who, at the beginning of today's Gospel, 'resolutely set out for Jerusalem.'

The key to how this freedom is to be exercised, Paul says, is love. Anything else is a return to the slavery from which the Galatians have so recently been liberated. So there is no 'ought', no 'should', in Paul's advice. He does not make the mistake of replacing one set of rules with another. 'Keep in step with the Spirit', he says.

One way of doing this is to take seriously our stewardship of what we have been given – our time, talents and treasure. They are the gifts entrusted to us to enable us to express the love of Christ in our own lives. What kind of fruit are we producing?

## **C - Proper 9**

### **Sunday between 3 – 9 July**

The story is told of a prison chaplain who entered a workshop where a prisoner was stitching together a mailbag. 'Ah, sewing, I see', said the chaplain. 'No, reaping', replied the man, sadly.

In Israel, harvest was always a time of anxiety. Where good land is scarce, and the weather hostile, as was true for most of the country, the success of the harvest meant the difference between an adequate diet and semi-starvation for most people. So getting the harvest in before the occasional summer thunderstorms might ruin it was a major preoccupation, and every able-bodied man and child would be involved. Families co-operated; and where a major landowner had completed his own harvest, he might well send his slaves to help those who otherwise might face difficulty in getting in their harvest. It's against this background that Jesus speaks of the urgency of his Father's harvest.

Of course, having any kind of harvest meant being prepared to save the seed corn needed from the previous year's crop. Failure to do so was the beginning of a downward spiral from which there was little chance of escape if there was a succession of poor harvests. 'Reaping what you sow' had a pressing urgency that would have been clearly understood by Paul's readers. It would have been, in their everyday experience, a matter of life and death.

And so Paul uses this image to remind them that what is true in the physical world is also true of the spiritual. Today's credit-heavy, consumerist society is not new; in the middle ages, it was common to save up one's sins for a final deathbed repentance – a kind of 'sin now, don't pay later' approach! But we are called to be mature Christians, reared on a healthy diet, not spiritual bulimics. Our stewardship is part of that process of sowing that helps ensure the harvest for which our Lord is waiting.

## **C - Proper 10**

### **Sunday between 10 – 16 July**

'Love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' wrote the authors of Deuteronomy, thereby provoking centuries of debate among Jewish scholars about what each meant. On 'heart', 'soul' and 'mind' they reach fairly ready general

agreement, but 'strength' was the stumbling block. Eventually, most rabbinical schools suggested that it meant 'money'.

Do we really remember, every week, that the offertory is part of our worship? What we put into it is a reflection of the value we ascribe to God. So how much is our God worth? The price of our Sunday paper? The 20 litres of fuel we use in our weekly commute to and from work? The cost of a family day out at a theme park?

Obviously we can't put a monetary value on God. But do we dare ask ourselves if we ever short change him?

## **C - Proper 11**

### **Sunday between 17 – 23 July**

Some people are like Eeyore – they're never happy unless they're miserable. In a sense, Martha was one of these. Idleness was anathema to her; she had to be busy. And she assumed that everyone else was the same. Mary, on the other hand, seems to have been an idealist; a dreamer; someone who was content to let things take their course.

One of the greatest sins today is sloth. And many people are not aware of their slothfulness; they don't have time to be; they're too busy! They confuse quantity with quality. They don't assess the value of what they do. They're Marthas; and Jesus' words suggest that such people are living by very different values from those of his kingdom.

Part of our response in Christian stewardship is taking time to sort out our priorities in the light of God's love. If we chose what is 'the better thing', it will not be taken away from us. But if we dissipate our energies in a frantic round of activity, we will probably never find it. We will remain slothful, undirected, unfulfilled, and ineffective in building God's kingdom.

## **C - Proper 12**

### **Sunday between 24 – 30 July**

The Lord's Prayer is a reminder that we live as part of a Christian family. Praying it takes about a minute; and it is virtually impossible to pray it alone. Somewhere in the world, someone who you will probably never meet – in Mexico, or Australia, or Uganda – is joining with you in the same prayer.

This principle of interconnectedness underlies our approach to Christian stewardship. Because we are united in worship of the same God, who freely gives good gifts to all his children, we are invited to model our behaviour on the same pattern, sharing what we have received.

Christian stewardship asks us to assess what we have received, and, in the light of that, what we are called to give. It places before us the challenge of equal generosity, equal sacrifice, in the worship of the Lord who treats each one of us with equal generosity, equal sacrifice. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are reminded of the part we are called to play.

## **C - Proper 13**

### **Sunday between 31 July – 6 August**

That attitude of the subject of Jesus' story reminds me of the wealthy businessman who wondered if he could take his money to heaven. He was near to death, and, having worked hard to earn his fortune, he prayed earnestly that he might be able to take it with him.

Suddenly, an angel appeared. 'Sorry, but you can't take anything with you.' But the man pleaded with the angel to ask God to bend the rules just this once. The angel disappeared and returned, informing the man that God has decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him.

Delighted, the man sells all he has and packs a suitcase with gold bars.

Soon after, he dies and arrives at the Pearly Gates. Peter sees his suitcase and stops

him. 'You can't bring that in here.' The man explains that he has been given special permission, so Peter checks and returns saying, 'You're right. You are allowed one carry-on bag. But I am supposed to check its contents before letting you through.'

Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaims, 'You brought paving slabs?!!!'

'Set your hearts on things above ... [where] your life is now hidden with Christ in God', Paul advised the Christians at Colossae. Our stewardship is a measure of how far we have progressed in this.

## **C - Proper 14**

### **Sunday between 7 – 13 August**

In today's Gospel, Jesus continues the theme of the contrast between earthly and heavenly wealth. It's couched in extreme terms, as though he expected the end of the age to be an imminent event, and it coloured some of the thinking of the early church. So what message does it hold for us, two thousand years later?

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews deals with this problem. By the time he was writing, the church held two or three generations of Christians, and the issue was urgent. And so he reminds them of the story of God's people, and how apparent frustration and failure had been part of God's plan. And so he urges them to have faith, and persevere, like Abraham.

This is part of or tradition. Our stewardship is our response in faith to the promises of God. Are we 'dressed ready for service'? Are our hearts where our treasure is?

## **C - Proper 15**

### **Sunday between 14 – 20 August**

One of the encouraging things about the extract from the Letter to the Hebrews that forms today's Epistle is the way in which it doesn't focus on the great and the good from Israel's history. It takes the story of a rabble of runaway slaves, and tells it 'warts and all'. And it concludes by offering us a chance to identify with them. They are, says the writer, those who encourage us in our pilgrimage.

The tone of our Gospel is addressed precisely to those whose leadership fails because they do not recognise the signs of the times, rather than the crowd. Last week we saw how the values of the Kingdom subvert established ideas; today's readings reinforce this theme. It is the faithful discipleship of the ordinary, unmarked individuals which brings in his father's kingdom.

This means that how we exercise our stewardship is of, literally, fundamental importance. There is no such thing as an insignificant Christian; there is no such thing as an insignificant gift.

## **C - Proper 16**

### **Sunday between 21 – 27 August**

'We glibly speak of nature's laws / but do things have a natural cause? / Black earth turned into yellow crocus / is undiluted hocus-pocus.' Thus Piet Hein queried our often oversimplification of what we call 'cause and effect'.

It stems from our inveterate desire to classify and categorise – a useful ability, provided it doesn't get out of control, as it had in today's Gospel. The sanctity of the Sabbath, originally instituted as a day of rest, had been elevated far beyond its original purpose, and was being used as an instrument of control so that it became oppressive, rather than liberating.

Churches are almost unparalleled as an institution in which this process can take place. 'This is the way it is done; this is the way it has always been done; this is the way it has to be done.' It can require a great deal of courage to ask, 'Why?' a stewardship campaign can

often provide a useful opportunity to look at the wider life of the church; at the corporate stewardship within which others are encouraged to develop their response. At times, it may feel traumatic; but in the long run, it is often therapeutic, and frees the church to become, once again, a healing community for those it serves.

## **C - Proper 17**

### **Sunday between 28 August – 3 September**

In a team-building exercise in an office in which I once worked, the senior management were criticised for excessive control over minutiae. The facilitator wrote 'nitpicking' on the flipchart. Suddenly, the head of department intervened. 'Excuse me', he said, 'but shouldn't there be a hyphen between 'nit' and 'picking'?'

Well, there's no managerial nitpicking – or nit-picking – in heaven, it seems. The heavenly banquet is, above all else, a demonstration of the overflowing generosity of God. 'Give all thou canst; high heaven rejects the lore / of nicely calculated less or more.' The radical theme that Luke has pursued in our last couple of week's readings here reaches a climax. There are no place cards; no top table; and the party is very much 'come as you are', and the duchess in her dungarees sits next to the chimney sweep in his Sunday best.

It's surprisingly difficult to love people for who they are, rather than what they do. But until we are able to do so, says Jesus, we will not enjoy the party. In Christian stewardship, we value each person for her or his contribution, regardless of size or importance, and celebrate with them the part they play in building the kingdom.

or

The broadcaster David Scott-Blackhall was once invited to a formal dinner. His host was most apologetic when he arrived. "I'm afraid Lord So-and-So has accepted his invitation; we didn't think he would. It means there won't actually be room for you on the top table." "That's all right", David replied, "put me on the lowest sprig. In any case, wherever I am will be the top table as far as I'm concerned."

What gives you your status? Jesus was aware of the social stratification of the society in which he lived, but seems to have been able to detach himself from it. But it didn't stop him from keeping a sharply sardonic eye on the struggle for status.

'When you throw your next party', he said, 'get your guests from the local refuge for the homeless; from the Job Centre; ask that group who sit around the bus station with their bottles of cider. Don't worry about them not knowing how to use the family silver; you probably won't have any by the end of the meal! At least you can be fairly sure they won't invite you back to share the contents of the dustbin outside that rather good little Italian restaurant you've just discovered!'

In Jesus' kingdom, status, it seems, is determined, not by what you have, but by what you give away. The 'sacrifice of praise' to which the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews refers is not a matter of Church services or private devotions. It is the quality of life lived by those who can get under the skin of their fellow human beings - especially those without the status to attract attention to themselves - and to use their time, their skills and their wealth to serve their Lord in them.

## **C - Proper 18**

### **Sunday between 4 – 10 September**

In the file where I keep such oddments, there's a cartoon that shows two couples discussing religion. 'I haven't actually died to sin' says one person, 'but I did feel kind of faint once.'

Today's Epistle is a story of repeated deaths. Onesimus, that 'useful' slave, has died to his former life of freedom – perhaps through economic necessity, perhaps as a prisoner of

war – we don't know. Then, by running away, he 'dies' again; if he is captured, his owner has the right to impose the death penalty as a punishment. In Rome, he hears, somehow, of the new faith Paul is preaching in prison, and 'dies' as he is baptised. It seems that Paul learns of his story, and, knowing his owner Philemon, a prominent fellow-Christian, is willing to 'die' to Onesimus' usefulness as he sends him back, with a letter that endorses his value, not merely as a slave, but as a new-found Christian brother, confident that his former owner will 'die' to his rights and welcome Onesimus back into his household with a new status.

Luke, in today's Gospel, records Jesus' teaching on the cost of discipleship. He, too, uses the language of death; 'taking up one's cross'; 'hating even one's own life'; and illustrates it by referring to the need to plan ahead when engaged in any great project. Discipleship, says Jesus, is not for the faint-hearted – or those who merely feel faint about what must be sacrificed on the way. It is the way of total commitment.

One of the problems facing the church today is the number of people whose stewardship is not a matter of sacrificial death, but merely a mild bout of indigestion! In church after church, three, or ten, or twenty people, give sacrificially – of their time, skill and money – while the other eight, or thirty, or eighty look on, unaware. One of the calls of Christian stewardship is to awaken these people to the real situation, and invite them to celebrate, not only their death to their present lifestyle, but their resurrection to a new pattern of discipleship.

or

A comment overheard at a football match, as the new signing lost the ball yet again; 'I don't care if they did pay nothing for him, he's still not worth it!'

Paul writes to Philemon, and affirms the value of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Under Roman law, Philemon has the right to execute him on his return, and Paul clearly places him under a moral obligation not to do so. Onesimus has a value far beyond this monetary worth as an asset; for he is now a Christian brother, and of equal status as a member of the Church.

In the Gospel, Luke speaks of the words of Jesus about counting the cost of discipleship. And his first comment is about the changes in relationships that come with the values of the kingdom. The old ties of family are subsumed under the new relationships of that kingdom where 'they neither marry nor are given in marriage'. To Jesus' hearers, 'take up your cross' would not have meant 'be prepared to face suffering'; perhaps the nearest equivalent we can find today is in the words of Palestinian children being prepared for the rôle of a suicide bomber in the intafada.

The cost of following Jesus, always, everywhere, is one life. Fortunately, this is exactly what you have. And, at some point, sooner or later, you are going to lose it anyway. At the end, what will it add up to, asks Jesus? A few half-finished dreams you were never able to complete? The follies of a romantic imagination in a ruined landscape? Or a life given to him, to be used in building his kingdom?

## **C - Proper 19**

### **Sunday between 11 – 17 September**

In today's Gospel, Luke picks up another theme of the kingdom – which is, as Robert Farrar Capon noted, for 'the last, the lost, the little, the least and the dead'.

Sheep are sheep – they do what sheep do. They don't agonise about moral decisions, or make elaborate plans for the future. There's no such thing as a good, or bad, sheep; only sheep. There is, however, such a thing as a valuable sheep.

All shepherds expect some losses from the flock. When I worked in Wales, I was in an area where one of the famous 'big cats' – a panther, according to those who'd seen it – ranged. I asked one farmer if he thought it was a problem. 'No', he said; 'I probably lose about half a dozen sheep a year to it, and most of those are sickly anyway. If anything, it's more of a benefit; it takes a hundred rabbits for every sheep it kills.' Obviously, there's a question of scale here; the loss of six sheep out of a flock of 2,500 is much less significant

that the loss of one sheep out of a flock of 100 sheep – which would have been a large flock belonging to a rich man in Jesus' culture.

But the shepherd in Jesus' parable is clearly an amateur. Common sense suggests that the one sheep must take its chance, not the 99 left unprotected, to wander off or be attacked while the shepherd is away. Even worse, when the sheep is found, it is not returned to the flock, but carried into the village so that the shepherd's neighbours can join in the celebrations, regardless of what disasters may be happening a mile away on the hills. Contrary to what you may have heard in Sunday School, these are not the actions of a good shepherd!

But, as the context makes plain, Jesus is not talking about sheep. He's talking about God – the 'Shepherd of Israel', as so many of the Old Testament prophets put it – and he's saying that God is not the 'good', prudent shepherd, but the reckless shepherd who is willing to gamble everything for the sake of the one sheep. This was the experience of Paul, when, writing to Timothy, he compared his former life with God's extravagant grace.

Which model of Christian stewardship do we tend to follow? Is it that of the prudent shepherd, careful with the resources for which we are responsible, doing what is reasonable? Or is it that of the reckless shepherd, willing to risk everything, but knowing that all is held within the love of God?

or

All of us, at some time, have known the feeling of bewilderment when what we were using only half an hour ago seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth. When that happens, our behaviour becomes increasingly irrational. Having searched in the obvious places, we move on to the less obvious, and the downright impossible, as though inanimate objects are somehow capable of burrowing their way under a pile of papers we haven't touched for a week, or creeping into a locked cupboard!

Perhaps that's why we identify so readily with the parables which form today's Gospel. And we forget that, in those parables, we are the object of the search. It is ourselves who are lost. We are, not the searcher, but the sought; a point which Paul makes in the Epistle, when he counts himself as the foremost sinner.

God searches for the lost because it is his nature. Note the words which Paul uses to describe God's dealings with him; mercy, grace, faith, love, patience. And, once restored, Paul's response is to offer himself in God's service in the strength of Christ. He wrote to the Church at Corinth, reminding them that they shared with the Apostles in being 'servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.'

As part of that stewardship, we are called to live lives that are offered to God in daily service, and reveal the presence of his kingdom where we live and work.

## **C - Proper 20**

### **Sunday between 18 – 24 September**

Luke switches us today from the lost sheep to the fast buck – via the parable of the lost son, which our lectionary omits. The steward – or manager – in this story, has clearly not absorbed the first lesson of management, which is that, when disaster strikes, blame should be laid at the door of the person really responsible – your predecessor. Perhaps he's been there, feathering his own nest, for too long for that to be effective; quite likely in view of the evidently cordial relationships he's built up with a range of clients.

Buying friendship, Jesus says, is a good investment; though it's a little ambiguous whether the 'eternal dwellings' will be in heaven or elsewhere! After all, why should anyone trust you when they know so much about the worst side of your character? Some years ago, in a 'Punch' cartoon, a businessman stood at his office window, his hand on his son's shoulder, and said, 'Never forget – it's not what you know – it's not who you know - it's what you've got on who you know!'

It's a far cry from the approach that says, 'I do not call you servants, but friends'. Jesus

puts his work into the hands of his disciples, not out of ignorance of the frailties of their nature, but because he knows it only too well. 'Apart from me, you can do nothing.' Our Christian stewardship can all too easily take the aggressive, manipulative form of the unjust manager, setting ever higher standards and challenges; focussed on results. Jesus reminds us that if we serve money in this way, even for his ends, we cannot serve God. What is needed is the response of love to love.

or

'An honest god's the noblest work of man', wrote Samuel Butler. One of the clearest evidences for the reality of the God revealed in the Gospels is the fact that, for a high percentage of the time, he acts in a most ungodlike way! Today's Gospel is a prime example. For, if Jesus is to be believed, God is a shady operator who breaks all his own rules. If any character in this parable stands for God, it is surely the manager, the steward. Faced with disaster, he rewrites the rules on the hoof. He uses creative accountancy to produce a result that is, from his point of view, satisfactory. He is an image of a God who, far from demanding the last ounce of flesh, offers his own; who goes out of the book-keeping business to which we try to confine him, and shows the shocking truth of what a universe run by grace is like.

So our stewardship is not a matter of rules, or percentages. It is a matter of learning to live by grace, as Jesus did. We can never ask, "Am I doing, or giving, enough?"; only, "Can I do, or give, more?" In God's economy, what we offer is always enough, when it is an offering of thanksgiving for all his grace. And without that sense of thanksgiving, we will always be plagued by guilt, by the fear that what we can offer is somehow inadequate. Of course it is. It always is. But we worship and serve a God who delights in the offerings of love, not one who stands on his rights. Thank God that we are made in his image, and not the other way round!

## **C - Proper 21**

### ***Sunday between 25 September – 1 October***

When computers first became widely used, an acronym quickly emerged: GIGO, standing for 'Garbage in garbage out'. Now that many treasurers use computers for the church accounts, there is at times a new acronym: GIAO. It stands for 'Garbage in, accounts out!' it refers to the sad ability of some people to believe that the computer is infallible, and that, if what the computer says doesn't match up with the real world, it's reality that's got it wrong.

The rich man was one such person – though without the computer. One problem of wealth is the way it can insulate us from reality. Money is a form of power, and like all forms of power, it can be used generously and creatively, or selfishly and abusively. St Paul, in today's Epistle, reminds Timothy that 'the love of money is the root of all evil things', and when we replace 'money' by 'power' in that sentence, his meaning becomes clearer. Money can bring status, influence, security. It can isolate us from our fellow beings. 'I don't understand why the unemployed don't just sell a few shares, or an antique, if they're hard up', said someone in one parish.

Money enables us to abuse relationships, often in remarkably subtle ways. We give to charity; but only to 'respectable' charities, working with causes of which we approve, and which assure us that they are careful not to waste funds on undeserving cases. We expect gratitude for our gifts. We close our eyes to the ethical and environmental policies of the companies which enable us maintain our lifestyle, and ignore the economic and social effects on people in other areas of the world. Money enables, or forces, us to live in areas with similar (the 'right'?) sort of people, who understand our needs and our problems.

Except that this insulation, this security, is often illusory. The more we have, the more we have to worry about. We give - 5%, a tithe, even - and still wonder if we have 'got it right'. We remember the story of the rich young ruler, and Jesus' command to 'sell all you have and give to the poor', and wonder if he meant his words to be taken seriously.

Giving - not in accordance with the needs of the PCC, or what we feel the Church

'deserves', frees us from this. Out of love for, and gratitude towards, God, we give. It enables us to say to those things that tempt us with their false promise of status and security, "I see you for what you are. I give first to God in joy, and I find I have enough for my needs." Not, perhaps, for my 'wants'; but when we give first of all to God, it is amazing how small our 'wants' become.

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also", said Jesus. Again, try saying, not 'treasure', but 'power'. Is the source of our power our possessions, our wealth, our influence; or is it the love which flows from the heart of God through us to his creation? What we chose to do with our money is, in a very real way, an acid test of the reality of our discipleship. As we surrender the power to control our own destiny, we create more space for God to rule in our lives.

or

There is a cartoon by Larry in which a 'lady bountiful;' presents a small coin to a beggar with the words, "I'm not giving you this for your sake, but for God's sake." "Then for Christ's sake, be a bit more generous!" is the beggar's reply.

Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus when he was confronted by a group of Pharisees who treated their ostentatious wealth as evidence of their piety, in accordance with the Jewish tradition which stated that prosperity was evidence of God's favour. So Jesus' words are not an attack on wealth in itself, but on the use of wealth in a way that led to the social and religious abuse of others.

The rich man's sin lay in his neglect of the commands of charity enjoined in the very law to which the Pharisees appealed to support their position. It is all too easy to be selective in our interpretation!

Paul reminds Timothy of this in our Epistle. It is not, as the song had it, that 'money is the root of all evil', but the love of money. The medieval scholastic theologians taught the doctrine of 'sufficiency'; unless we can say, 'I have enough', we can never be truly free to be ourselves. And if we are not truly ourselves, how can we love God, who sees us as we are, rather than as we imagine ourselves to be?

Wealth, says Paul, cannot be separated from responsibility. It is a tool for pursuing righteousness and love, a weapon to be used in the Christian's warfare, rather than as a shield against the world. Our giving is a very real part of our commitment and of our discipleship.

## **C - Proper 22**

### **Sunday between 2 – 8 October**

In his novel, 'Father Malachy's Miracle', Bruce Marshall tells the story of an Edinburgh priest in the 1920's who took today's Gospel seriously. As a result of his prayers, a nightclub that has opened opposite his church is transported to the top of Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth. But, far from solving his problems, they become worse; the nightclub becomes a focus of attention, and he is hounded by both the press, scenting a good story, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, made distinctly uncomfortable by such happenings! I won't spoil things by telling you the end of the story, but it's both a comic and savagely satirical view of the church that is presented.

So perhaps it's just as well that most people rarely seem to pray seriously, 'Lord, increase our faith.' Perhaps it's because we're afraid of what the results might be. Perhaps that was the case with Timothy; Paul writes to him, 'fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you, through the laying on of my hands.' And he goes on to remind him that this gift, while it may disrupt the comfortable pattern of life, is not in itself destructive; it is 'the spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.'

This sounds very much like the basic principles that underlie the practice of Christian stewardship. 'Self-discipline' is a basic starting point; we are called to plan our use of our

time, our skills and our money, rather than simply living from moment to moment and fashion to fashion. We are to live responsibly.

But responsibility can be hard and uncaring. We are to have the spirit of love – not a soft sentimentality, or Paul could not have written these words. It is the love that desires the best for each person and each situation, and is prepared to bear the cost when this leads to the place of crucifixion where differences seem to be irreconcilable.

And we can only do this if we rely, not on our own strength, but on the life of the Spirit within us, as Paul reminds Timothy. This is why, when all is done, we are to say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'

or

Are you green-fingered or brown-fingered? Some people can apparently throw a handful of seeds onto a pile of broken bricks, and a few weeks later have a display worthy of the Royal Horticultural Society! Others follow every instruction, fertilise, mulch and water as directed, and finish up with three straggly stalks struggling to survive among a wonderful crop of weeds!

The same is true of our faith. Some people have a serenity which others envy while they struggle with doubts and problems which they imagine are unique to them. And perhaps the disciples were more like the second group. 'Lord, increase our faith!' they asked Jesus.

Jesus' answer seems to imply that 'increasing faith' is a matter of exercising it. He goes further; he tells his disciples that 'faith' is not a matter for competition; that they are not to indulge in playground games of 'my faith's better than yours!' The only test which is to be applied to 'faith' is how effective it is in working towards his father's mission in the world.

This is the advice that Paul gives to Timothy in today's Epistle. 'Fan into flame the gift of God which is in you', wrote Paul, adding that God has given his ministers the spirit of power, love and self-discipline. Power; the ability to know and carry out God's will: love; the ability to do so sensitively, constructively and gently: self-control; the ability to do so without seeking our own interests. This is the 'deposit' which Timothy is encouraged to guard.

This, too, is what lies at the core of Christian Stewardship. Each of us has our share of God's resources; our time, our talents, our wealth. Each of us is called to use them in his service with power, love and self-discipline, fanning into flame the gift of God which is in us. As Paul reminded Timothy, we do so, not through our own efforts, but through the power of the Holy Spirit living in us.

## **C - Proper 23**

### **Sunday between 9 – 15 October**

It's amazing how often, because of cultural assumptions, we miss the point of Jesus' parables. I can't help wondering how many people regard the nine lepers who fail to return to give thanks as ungrateful. In fact, they would have had little chance to do so. After an eight-day period of ritual purification, as required by the Law, tracking down a wandering preacher who could have gone almost anywhere would have been a totally unreasonable task. Most of us, in a similar situation, would have said, 'If I ever meet him again ...'

The only one who returns was a Samaritan. For an orthodox Jew, this would have been to invite the inevitable response regarding those who didn't follow an equally strict interpretation of the Law; 'What else could you expect?' And there's no suggestion that the other nine were not equally healed – or equally grateful. But the Samaritan's joy pushes him beyond the bounds of what is reasonable, what is expected, what is legally demanded. It is the foreigner, the outsider, who makes the connection.

It is when our lives display a similar pattern of joy and generosity in response that our mission is most effective. Perhaps it is also true that it is when we are at our most legalistically defensive that the Gospel is seen as sterile and unattractive. Our growth in stewardship and our growth in mission are more closely intertwined than we sometimes imagine.

or

How quickly, and how easily, we can read a story like this, and miss so much of its significance. For it's a story full of paradox, of contradiction, which we lose if we merely accept it at face value.

What is Jesus doing here in the first place? The obvious route from Galilee to Jerusalem is down the Jordan valley; but Jesus seems to have returned to his native hill country, perhaps aware that this may be the last time he will see it. Perhaps, too, he hopes to keep out of the public eye for a while; it was an area with a sparse, scattered population.

But if that was the case, his plan fails. Out on one of the barren ridges between the pockets of fertile soil, he encounters a group of lepers. Rejected by both the Jews and Samaritans as ritually unclean, perhaps they have taken over an abandoned farm, and are squatting, eking out a precarious living.

They respect the religious and cultural taboos that have reduced them to this life. There is no contact, only an appeal at a distance to the one they recognise - perhaps because one or more were childhood friends, and the stories of his ministry have reached even their isolation. And Jesus, too, respects, and upholds the Law. His command is simple; "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

There is no suggestion that all ten are not healed. But they will not be pronounced clean until eight days of ritual bathing have been completed. And therefore they cannot return, as the Samaritan does. It seems that the response of gratitude transcends the lesser demand of the law of purity, at least in the eyes of Jesus.

'Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'; we have so much for which we can show gratitude. Do we sometimes get tied up in the minutiae of church life? Or do we allow our hearts to overflow, like that Samaritan, and offer all that we are and have to Jesus?

## **C - Proper 24**

### **Sunday between 16 – 22 October**

I suppose it depends on your point of view whether you're mainly amused or outraged by the activities of 'fathers for Justice'. One thing that can certainly be said is that it reflects the present climate of 'When in doubt, stage a protest!' What's certain is that it's not just a new phenomenon; the parable that we've just read is about a one-woman protest – and a long-running protest at that! But it's misleading, to say the least, if we read it simply as a vindication of direct action.

The widow speaks and acts out of desperation. Under the code of Jesus' day, a woman has no right, no place, in a court; if she has a grievance, it must be brought on her behalf by a male relative – and it seems she has none. But she refuses to accept the fact of her powerlessness, and, in spite of there being no legal precedent, is vindicated. Jesus holds this up as a model of the way in which God works – not because we have some claim on him, but because this is the kind of God he is.

I have a sneaking suspicion that Luke, and the other disciples, didn't really grasp the point of this parable, and were afraid that others would be in the same boat – hence the editorial explanation with which it is introduced. And in stewardship terms, it's perhaps more helpful to see it as a reminder that God is generous to us, not because of what we deserve; not as a reward, or as a bribe, but because he is a generous, giving God. By definition, grace can never be a possession, only a gift; and therefore, life in grace must be characterised by a willingness to give in return.

or

'Preach the Gospel constantly', St Francis told his disciples. And he then added, 'If you have to, use words.'

Luke seems to have been among the many people who have been puzzled by the

parable Jesus told which we read as the Gospel this morning. An incorruptible judge was something of a rarity; but this one seems to have applied the law disinterestedly. However, he also ignores the requirement of Jewish Law which says that he is to have special concern for those who depend on him to uphold their rights. Among these were widows; a woman could not initiate an action in a court, and would have to depend on a male relative being willing and able to present her case. Presumably this widow had no-one to do this for her.

The eventual outcome is, from her point of view, satisfactory. But do we ever wonder whether she actually gets justice? We know nothing of the merits of her case, or its weaknesses.

What is even more shocking is that Jesus holds this up as a model of God's justice. He decides for his people, not out of the rightness of their cause, but because he chooses to do so. Not only is he supremely uninterested in our human concepts of 'justice'; he is also unconcerned with our projections of our own values onto him. He forgives, he reconciles, he redeems, because, quite simply, he is a forgiving, reconciling, redeeming God. His actions reveal his nature.

Our actions, too, should reveal his nature, through the work of the Holy Spirit. We are called to show the same kind of generous, reckless love that we have received. We are to abandon the caution which 'common sense' ordains, and enter into the heart of the life of God himself. Our commitment to him in thanksgiving is what frees us to give our time, our talents, and our riches to building his kingdom; to preach the Gospel, whether we are using words or not

## **C - Proper 25**

### **Sunday between 23 – 29 October**

Once again, we need to be aware of cultural assumptions. 'A Pharisee praying about himself' was hardly unusual in Jesus' day; but it doesn't mean what we might think. Every Pharisee had his 'special' prayer, in which he set out his stall on his teaching - the equivalent of today's web page - to attract pupils. Jesus himself did this; his disciples, slow on the uptake, asked him to 'teach them to pray, as John taught his disciples to pray.' They wanted to know where he was coming from. His reply, of course, was what we now know as the Lord's Prayer.

The difference between the prayer of the Pharisee and the Lord's Prayer - or the tax-collector's prayer, for that matter - is that it entirely excludes any suggestion of a relationship. The Pharisee reports to God on the successful completion of a task; every i is dotted, and every t crossed; you can almost hear him mentally adding, 'Got the T-shirt.' The task is all; it doesn't matter what kind of God it is being done for - or even if there is a god at all. The contrast between the Lord's Prayer, with its opening, 'Daddy', and the tax-collector's recognition of a failed relationship could hardly be greater.

It's easy to think of stewardship as a series of rules; of boxes to be ticked. 'Tithing - tick; two hours helping run off the magazine - tick', and so on. But that's the stewardship of the Pharisee. Our stewardship is Christian stewardship; it stems from our relationship with Jesus, and is the response of our love to his love. It is in this context that we work out what we are called to be and to do.

Paul could write, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith ...' as he looked forward to his reward. Here is an honest assessment of what he has done with his vocation as an apostle. As stewards of the gifts entrusted to us, can we say the same?

or

A Sunday School teacher was telling her class the story of the Pharisee and the publican. At the end, she solemnly said, "And so, children, we must all thank God that we are just nice, ordinary people, and not like that horrible Pharisee."

Take yourself forward a week, and stand in the same place in the Temple. Once again,

watch the Pharisee and the publican come to pray. Listen carefully to the publican. What do you expect to hear? A little less extortion practised? Parties with a cheap local wine instead of an imported vintage? A few donations to charity, perhaps? And ask yourself this important question: why are you sending him away with the Pharisee's words in his mouth?

The publican has recognised, even if he doesn't put it in theological terms, that his salvation depends, not on his ability at wheeling and dealing, but on his acceptance of God's free grace. It's the one thing that all his business acumen, all his under the counter dealings, cannot secure.

And, strangely enough, it's something the Pharisee hasn't recognized. Even though he thanks God for what he has, his attitude is one of introverted isolation; 'I am not like other men.'

Is part of our problem that we are just 'nice, ordinary people'? Do we find those who take their faith seriously somehow uncomfortable to be with? Paul, writing to Timothy, speaks of the sacrifice of his life in Christ's service in a way it may be hard to imagine on the lips of some of our congregations, perhaps. But, as he goes on to show, this was not merely human activity; it stemmed from his very real sense of the presence, day by day, of the Lord he served.

The Pharisee used his religion to cut himself off from other people. At every Eucharist, we, like Paul, come to be broken, poured out; made vulnerable so that all that we have and are can be shared in God's mission to his world.

## ***C - Last Sunday after Trinity if observed as Bible Sunday***

'And what's your favourite Bible passage?' is a common question when people are being profiled in the parish magazine. Perhaps Jesus would have cited the passage from Isaiah he used to announce his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth.

Perhaps he chose it to make the point that this was to be, not only the starting point for his ministry, but also the starting point for his rejection. Even in this honeymoon period, the cross casts its shadow. Good news for some will be bad news for those who shelter behind vested interests; and freedom, sight and release are all too often seen as the preserve of those who have earned it, not something to be squandered on the feckless and irresponsible. 'Who does he think he is?' asked those who knew him as old Joseph's son.

The Isaiah agenda shares with the message of Christian stewardship a commitment to being 'good news'; for it is often the poorest in our churches whose sacrificial giving sustains the life of the worshipping community, and whose lifestyle proclaims the joy of freedom from the burdens imposed by our consumer society. It is so often these people who catch a vision of what Isaiah, and Jesus, meant. I'm sometimes asked, 'Are we expected to take what the Bible says about stewardship seriously?' The answer is 'Yes.'

or

An atheist once remarked that, if the Bible is the word of God, he clearly has a speech impediment! It seems that Jesus, too, found a similar ability to be misheard. Even the Word of God is capable of being misunderstood.

Even Jesus seems to have discovered that he needed to do more than simply proclaim his Father's word. He had to embody it; and for most of his ministry, he abandoned the direct style that was so disastrous at Nazareth. Instead, he taught elliptically, through stories and parables, and attracted followers as much by his lifestyle as his words.

Paul, writing to the Corinthian church, reminded his readers that they were 'a living letter'. The vocation of each and every Christian is to show the indwelling Word. Without this, no matter how well we know our Bibles, the word of God is muffled. A generation ago, at the height of the American civil rights protest movement, the writer James Baldwin said to the American church, "I shall no longer listen to what you say. But I shall; watch very carefully what you do."

Stewardship is part of the discipline we need to bring to our lives if we are to embody

the Gospel authentically. It is not, primarily, a matter of using our time and talents responsibly; it is not even a matter of how much we give to the church or to charities. It is about living in accordance with the values of the Kingdom of God. It is about 'building up our neighbour by our lives', as Paul reminded the Christians in Rome. It is about helping bring release to the prisoners, and sight to the blind. And we cannot do this if we are enslaved and blinded by our own possessions.

Just as we need the discipline of regular Bible study, prayer and worship, we need to reassess, from time to time, whether our use of our time, skills and wealth is such that, through our daily lives, we point others to our Lord.

## **C - The Fourth Sunday before Advent**

The story is told of two men who met in the village street. 'Tell me', asked one, 'was it you or your brother who died last week?'

We normally read this story as being the result of Zacchaeus' search for Jesus. But it's equally valid, and more accurate, to read it as an account of Jesus' search for Zacchaeus. Luke's account of the journey to Jerusalem takes Jesus from Galilee down the Jordan valley, and the most direct route to Jerusalem is to pick up the caravan route at the Falls of Jordan and then through Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples enter, there is the encounter with a blind beggar, presumably Bartimaeus, who Matthew and Mark place later as they leave Jericho. But Luke is preparing the way to explain what 'seeing' Jesus means in the lives of those who encounter him.

And it seems that the only response to the generosity of love is loving generosity. Keeping open house with Jesus means not merely turning ones back on what has gone before; it involves going far beyond what is reasonable, as the love that has been given flows out in its turn.

Those who find the message of Christian stewardship difficult are often those who think that it can be reduced to a set of rules. Nothing is further from the truth. It begins with our encounter with Christ; and only he can set any limit to our response.

or

'Size isn't everything' is a comment that might be applicable to Zacchaeus. He was clearly a man who lacked stature; not only physically, but also, it seems, morally and socially. No-one loves a tax collector; and a tax collector who operates as an agent of an occupying power, and lines his own pocket at the same time must be clear leader in the unpopularity stakes.

You can imagine the comments as he sat in the sycamore tree; "Funny kind of fruit this year, isn't it?" "Anybody got a stick? Perhaps we can knock it down!" "No, it's not a fruit, it's a bird. Throw a stone and watch it fly!" Exposure, in both the literal and metaphorical sense, is the last thing Zacchaeus appears to need!

But without exposure, he will not encounter Jesus. He will not meet with the one who sees through to the reality of the person beneath the shell, and enables it to blossom. The generosity of Jesus in his approach to Zacchaeus is mirrored in the generosity of Zacchaeus' transformed life.

How generously do we live? And, if we are less generous than Zacchaeus, is it perhaps because we have not yet had the same sort of encounter with Jesus? Are we, in every sense, playing it safe? Remember that, for Zacchaeus, a life-changing encounter came when he was out on a limb! We don't know how he got down out of the tree; but my guess is that he fell out of it in sheer astonishment! Are we willing to place ourselves where Jesus can astonish us by the lavishness with which he gives to us? And are we ready to respond in an equally lavish way?

or

In Caryl Brahms and A J Simons' historical comedy, 'No Bed for Bacon', there is a

scene where a group of retired Elizabethan sea-captains are taking part in a maritime procession on the Thames. Lord Burleigh is asked why he is in tears. 'Ah,' he says, 'I was remembering the Armada.' 'But that was forty years ago' is the response. 'When you reach my age,' responds Burleigh, 'It is not what you remember, but the fact that you can remember anything at all that is important.'

Our Gospels are made up of memories. Sometimes they're vivid, dramatic events like the encounter with Zacchaeus we've just heard, witnessed by large crowds; sometimes they're much more private; and interspersed with them are individual and corporate reflection to bring home the significance of a simple story to different readers. But no matter how varied, behind all of them there is someone saying, 'I remember.' Memory has to be carried forward; 'God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.'

Memory lies at the very heart of our worship. 'Do this in remembrance of me', said Jesus. Not merely recalling a long past event, but bringing it effectively into the present, with a power to change lives in a way no story can ever do, even if it is begun with 'Once upon a time'. Our stewardship is part of that response, that change. It is how we tell what happens when our story meets God's story, and their subsequent interaction. Now read on.

### **C - The Third Sunday before Advent**

There is an old joke which asks, 'What is the maximum penalty for bigamy?' The answer is, 'Two Mothers-in-Law.'

The Sadducees' question about marriage has something of this attitude about it. They set up a situation which is so unlikely that it lies on the far edge of possibility, and then throw in a further condition which demonstrates the real nature of their question.

Jesus sidesteps the issue altogether. "You are", he says, "asking the wrong question altogether. Not only is it the wrong question, it's the wrong kind of question. I can't, and won't answer it. It's as though you wanted to know which is heavier, yellow or blue."

So many of the questions asked about Christian Stewardship come under the same heading. Should we aim to give 5% or 10% of our income to and through the church? Is that gross or net income? What about other charitable giving? Can I take off other essential payments - mortgage, life insurance, and so on?

"God", said Jesus, "is the God of the living, not the dead." What concerns him is, not the correctness of our legally worked out positions, but the living relationship which we express through our actions. Ever since the earliest days, the church has been tempted to retreat behind rules and regulations. Simple inertia ensures that there is a constant need to guard against treating the status quo as some kind of perfect, divinely ordained state. Our stewardship is part of that process of travelling light, of being a pilgrim people, which is integral to our vocation.

### **C - The Second Sunday before Advent**

'Are we nearly there yet?' It's such a relief to get to an age where that's no longer the refrain from the back seat - in fact, these days, I spend most of the time with the back seat empty. But it's interesting, isn't it, that the cry was always, 'nearly there'. It's as though there was great delight in the knowledge that the journey would soon be over; but not just yet, not just yet.

Jesus' disciples were asking the same question. 'Are we nearly there yet?' And Jesus' reply is, 'Yes; but 'there' may not be where you expect it to be.' Soon, the disciples will be living fully in the Kingdom he is bringing in. And they will be just as confused, frightened, exhilarated, as they have been over the previous three years. There will still be work to do, problems to be solved; and he will still be there, as support, as inspiration, but in a new way. They will have to learn to be disciples in the same way that we have done.

How are we travelling? Some people can go round the world with a spare pair of socks and a toothbrush; others need three suitcases for an overnight stop. Have we got our baggage organised - whatever it may be - or are we so encumbered that we spend all or time picking

up the packages and parcels we've dropped, and never travel anywhere?

or

Traditionally, sloth was regarded as one of the seven deadly sins. Certainly, the line laid down by Paul writing to the Church at Thessalonica seems to support such a stance. But we need to be careful in our definition of 'sloth'.

For sloth is one of the besetting sins of the present age. We live in a world of instant reaction; of sound bites; and therefore, very often, of caricature. Under the pressures of life today, we almost cease to think, to reason, to test; we skim from moment to moment. We are very busy; but our life has no depth, no meaning.

In today's Gospel, the disciples show the outcome of this. Like provincial tourists, they stand gawping at the magnificence of the Temple. And Jesus brings them down to earth with a bump. 'It's going', he says; 'it's all going. Not just this building, but everything you've built your life on – family relationships, social and economic structures; all the things you thought were so unshakeable you never even really thought about them. If you follow me, I can't protect you from experiencing the same reaction as I myself experience – from entering into my passion. All I can do is keep you safe – the real, essential, you that you will discover through this process.'

'Discovering who we are' is one of the aims of our stewardship. We are led to the question, 'What do I really depend on?' as we face the challenge of our giving – of our time, our skills, our money. And we discover, like Paul, that what can be counted on, no matter what our circumstances may be, is the grace and goodness of God, who delights in all we offer in thanks for his goodness.

## **C - Christ the King The Sunday next before Advent**

I've recently, after 40 years of dedication to old-fashioned film, taken the plunge into digital photography, and am having to relearn some of my techniques. Yesterday, I spent part of an afternoon in one of our rural churchyards, practicing my macro techniques on acquiring images of an incredible variety of fungi! By the end of half an hour, I was producing some very acceptable images. But some of the early ones – oh dear!

Writing to the Christians at Colossae, Paul reminds them that, if they wish to see God, they can do so in Jesus. But it will not be the kind of image they might expect. Our Gospel today, on the feast of Christ the King, gives us the paradox of a God who shows his glory through ignominy, who triumphs through being defeated, who reigns from a cross.

And yet, in spite of this, we cling to our own pretensions. We are strangely reluctant to let go of those things that, in the eyes of the world, give status, security, importance. My favourite definition of Christian Stewardship is that it is 'What I do after I say, 'I believe'.' It asks, 'Over what parts of my life is Christ the Lord?' And it is precisely those areas which I find hardest to relinquish control that his kingship is most needed, if his image is to be truly seen in me.

or

'Who does he (or she) take after?'; a question asked about almost every new baby, regardless of the fact that most resemble a cross between the elderly versions of Queen Victoria and Winston Churchill. Generally, it's only as a child grows up that family characteristics begin to emerge.

Jesus, says Paul, has the family resemblance of God, his Father. And it is seen most clearly in the snapshot which forms our Gospel today.

There is nothing glamorous about crucifixion. Forget the sanitised images which adorn our churches. Jesus hangs naked, in a position in which, after a few minutes, pain is the only sensation. He has lost control of bladder and bowels. He can barely breathe, and every gasp brings in the stench of his own degradation. He cannot even brush away the biting flies,

attracted by his sweat and blood, drying in the sun.

This is a God who has gone out of the 'God-business'; the fantasies his creatures have woven about him; and who has abandoned everything to show his love for his creation. It will not stop us misrepresenting him and misinterpreting him; but, once again, he poses the question with which he confronted his disciples; 'Who do you say that I am?'

And if we dare to say, 'This is our God; the One in whose image we are made', then we are called to share in the same quality of sacrificial self-giving. We too must become, like him, 'a portrait of the invisible God' who has become so very visible. We are called to share in his vulnerability. He calls us to let him take down the walls behind which we hide.

And our money is no bad place to start. For that image of Christ on the cross sums up the true value of all our possessions. When we share in that image of self-giving; when we allow ourselves to be stripped of all that gives us status and dignity, and embrace the glory of the crucified Jesus, we share in 'the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light'.

## **SAINT'S DAYS etc.**

### ***The Holy Innocents***

#### ***28th December***

A friend of mine once started a society for the rehabilitation of Herod. He pointed out that there were numerous examples of monarchs who were, often falsely, associated with crimes they did not commit – Richard III, for example – while others were regarded as shrewd and far-sighted, in spite of pursuing a policy of family extermination to secure their succession.

It never really got off the ground. Some prejudices are just too deeply ingrained to be overcome. Perhaps that's why Paul reminded the Christians at Corinth that God's values and the values of 'the world' are sometimes very different. They depend on the value we put on love.

Our growth in stewardship is often a reflection of our own growth in the love of God, and of our commitment to the values of his kingdom.

### ***Epiphany***

#### ***6th January***

'One of the best things about the days after Christmas', someone once said, 'is going round the shops exchanging the gifts people have given you for what you really wanted.' We've all had the occasional disaster; I had an elderly aunt who thought an 18 year old still had the tastes of an 8 year old! But the value of a gift is not simply its monetary worth; much more important is the care and thought which has gone into ensuring that it is what the recipient really wanted.

The gifts of the magi have become invested with a significance that is probably far beyond their original meaning. Mary Lofts, in her novel, 'How Far to Bethlehem?', charts their journey, and the origin of the gifts they brought, in a way which, although clearly fiction, invests them with a deep symbolism. They become, in her story, the crown of a deposed ruler, the incense intended for a pagan altar, and the healing ointment that soothed a slave's sores. It is the presence of Christ which transforms the everyday into the holy.

How much thought, how much prayer, has gone into our gifts to Jesus and his church? Dare we imagine that we could have rubbed shoulders with Jesus in Marks and Spencer's, as he sadly said, 'I'm sorry, but it's just not my style at all'? Do we give what everybody else is giving, or does our gift reflect our unique talents and abilities? Can we give, not only out of our generosity, but also out of our poverty – those parts of our lives we may feel have nothing

to contribute, to be of no value? Our gifts are brought, after all, to one who knows all our weakness, our helplessness, our frailty; who shares the totality of our human nature.

or

Paul, writing to the Christians at Ephesus, uses a word that occurs only rarely in the New Testament; 'mysterion'. It's usually translated as 'Mystery', but this misses some of the overtones that would have come through to a Greek reader. To us, a mystery is a problem to be solved; but a 'mysterion' is something that is beyond human comprehension. Not only could we never solve it; often, we could never even guess at its existence. It is one of Donald Rumsfeld's 'unknown unknowns'.

The Magi illustrate this. They believe they have received a message; a message they are compelled to follow, even though they are unsure of its meaning. They are searching for a king, who they assume will be in conventional form, born into a royal household: they could never have guessed that this obscure family, shortly to become refugees, is the object of their quest.

Our stewardship is one of the ways in which we are led into the 'mysterion' of Christ. As we discover the joys of sacrificial giving, we are led into a deeper understanding of the generosity of God, and the 'unspeakable riches of Christ', in which we share.

## ***The Conversion of St Paul***

### ***25th January***

'Hate', someone once observed, 'is not the opposite of love, but its twin. Hate is love with its back turned'. Very often, what we most vehemently oppose is what we are reluctant to admit we find attractive; perhaps Saul is a case in point.

But the story is not just about the conversion of Saul; it's equally about the conversion of Ananias. He demonstrates the truth of those words from today's Gospel about the last being first and the first last. He is the person in the right place at the right time; perhaps the only person in the whole of the young church in Damascus who is prepared to overcome his fears of what he has heard about Saul. The entire outcome of the Damascus road experience depends on him.

We are not necessarily aware of the importance of what we bring to the service of Christ's kingdom. What is important is that, like Ananias, we bring what we have in faith, and leave the outcome to God. Some years ago, I drove home from a meeting with a PCC on a foggy winter's night, thumping the steering wheel in frustration at their lack of response. Five years later, I had a letter. It said, 'You may remember coming to our PCC. I was so angry at their apathy that I started asking questions. As a result of those questions, in three weeks' time I am to be ordained deacon.' I had been of John's Damascus road, and never knew it.

## ***The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candelmas)***

### ***2nd February***

'As things so very often are/intelligence won't get you far,/so be glad you've got more sense/than you've got intelligence.' (Piet Hein) Or, as we more usually say, 'Things are not always what they seem.'

It's important not to try to turn Jesus into some kind of scrambled egg. In the divinity of Jesus, there is no trace of humanity. In the humanity of Jesus, you will search in vain for a sign of divinity. He is not superman; he is merely – completely and totally – human. We must resist all the subtle, and not-so-subtle, temptations to pretend otherwise.

But, having done so, we can then speak of either person freely. We can say God 'knows' what it is to be tired, or hungry; we can gain an insight into the poetic imagery so often used in the Bible to describe transcendence. We begin to, if not understand, at least comprehend, what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews is trying to express. We can join with Simeon in the words we know as the Nunc Dimittis. We can know that it is possible to 'place our resources in God's hands', and find them blessed, and increased beyond measure as we share them.

## ***Ss Peter and Paul***

### ***29th June***

Some stories appeal to some people more than others. As a child, I had a Sunday School teacher who was fixated on Peter's escape from prison, today's Epistle; it seemed to come up about once a month. 'Oh, no! Not again!' was our silent reaction after about the fifth repetition.

But if the gospel is about freedom, we need to take very seriously the question, 'What do we need to be freed from?' Some years ago, I used a Bible study in a parish, using the Exodus to model the parish's story. 'When were you enslaved, and by what?' was the first question. Their response was emphatic; 'We have never been enslaved!' And with this attitude of sturdy independence, it's very hard to speak of the response of love to Love. They were doing God a favour by going to church – just so long as he kept in his place!

It is when, like Peter, we assent with our whole heart, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God', that Stewardship falls into place. Like Peter, we may find that that commitment leads unto some unexpected, and even difficult places. But, like Peter, we will also discover the limitless resources of God poured out to those who trust him, and chose the freedom of his service.

## ***St James the Apostle***

### ***25th July***

'There's no need to call me 'Sir', my good man!' We've probably all encountered something of that attitude at various times. Idries Shah, in his wonderful anthropological study, 'In Darkest England', tells of a letter he received instructing him to carry out various responsibilities, and warning of the penalties to be imposed if he failed. It was signed, 'Your obedient servant', and he wondered just who was the servant and who the master!

James and John appear to have suffered under a similar misapprehension – or perhaps it was their mother. On their behalf, she requests a rôle as a servant – admittedly, a senior and privileged servant, but still a servant – and Jesus points out that, like the rest of the disciples, who betray themselves by their indignation, they have not yet grasped the nature of his kingdom. Within it, the only possible status is to have no status.

As stewards, we proclaim ourselves servants. We abandon our pretensions to status, and in so doing, are free to set aside those things which, in most peoples lives, serve as substitutes for knowing the love of God.

## ***The Blessed Virgin Mary***

### ***15th August***

Someone once called the Magnificat, which forms today's Gospel, 'An agenda for a radical church'. Certainly, it can be read that way; all this 'scattering the proud', and 'bringing down rulers from their thrones!' But we are likely to go astray unless we remember that its origins lie in worship, and in the glory of God.

The incarnation is not the negation of earthly values, but an affirmation of them in the light of heaven. They are to be seen through the eyes of the daughters and sons who are the inheritors of the Kingdom, as Paul reminded the Galatians. The Magnificat affirms an equality

of service, not status.

In our stewardship, this is something that is emphasised. We speak of 'equal sacrifice'; of 'giving in proportion to what we have received'. In it, we say that it is the humble and poor who are filled with good things, and the rich – those who cling on to 'their' possessions – who find offence, and turn away, empty and unfulfilled by the message. Dare we say that Mary was the first Stewardship advisor?

## **St Barnabas the Apostle**

### **24th August**

There is a story from India of church service at which the preacher was a man famed for his eloquence. On one particular Sunday, he excelled himself, and the entire congregation were moved to tears by his fervour - or almost the entire congregation. In the very front pew sat just one man, arms folded, expressionless, quite unmoved. At the end of the service, one of the churchwardens asked him what he thought of the preacher. 'I thought him excellent', the man replied; 'it was one of the most moving sermons I have ever heard.' 'Then why did you not respond to it, as the rest of us did?' enquired the Churchwarden. 'Because I am not from this parish' was the answer.

The Christians at Corinth clearly considered themselves to be 'from another parish'. Paul contrasts their approach to their faith with that of himself and his fellow apostles, using the image of the captives after a battle being led to the arena. 'We are', he writes, 'fools for Christ.'

Perhaps he had in mind those words of Jesus that come towards the end of today's Gospel; 'I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me'. The victory feast to which Christ invites his disciples is for those who have shared in his life of service. 'Greatness' in the church is a paradox; it is measured, not by success – whatever that may mean – but by faithfulness.

Our stewardship provides a measure of this – of how 'fit for purpose' our lives and our actions are. Are we in the Emperor's box, or in the arena?

## **Holy Cross Day**

### **14th September**

It was, I think, Henry Phillpotts, Bishop of Exeter in the mid Nineteenth century, who was famed for his absent-mindedness. On one occasion, after chatting to someone in the street for several minutes, he enquired, 'When I met you, was I going up the street or down?' 'You were coming down, my Lord.' 'Ah! In that case, I've had my lunch!' said the Bishop.

For St John, 'up' and 'down' are never a simple matter of direction. Behind the descriptive fact there is always a spiritual direction, a spiritual movement. And nowhere is this more clearly stated than in today's Gospel. Jesus comes 'down', and is lifted 'up', so that a fallen cosmos can be 'raised' to its intended place. It is this process that the early hymn, quoted by Paul in our Epistle, celebrates. And already, the early church is developing its theology of the consequences of such statements in terms of the response of worshippers.

'Every knee should bow ... every tongue confess'. The worship of the risen Lord is to be not only a matter of words, but also actions. Christian Stewardship is one of the ways in which these actions are expressed through the commitment of our lives and resources to the worship of God.

## **St Matthew**

### **21st September**

In a doctor's waiting room, a man was causing his fellow patients some concern. As he sat, he was constantly muttering to himself, 'I hope I'm very ill! I hope I'm very ill!' At length, a receptionist asked him if anything was wrong. 'No', he replied, 'I'd just hate to think that

someone who felt like I do was really well!

The call of Matthew shows an interesting perspective on 'health' and 'sickness' from the point of view of Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees have a world that is neatly divided into 'them' and 'us'; 'we', and those like us are healthy, and every one else is 'sick' – tax-gatherers and sinners, the ritually unclean. And so they are scandalised when Jesus tramples over their carefully drawn lines, smudges the boundaries, and leaves them in confusion.

Jesus reminds them that mercy and sacrifice are two sides of the same coin. Mercy will involve sacrifice, because to show love to another – to be ruthless against all that works against their joy – almost inevitably involves suffering. And to know the cost of love is to experience the judgement that, paradoxically, brings redemption. We see this most clearly in the cross.

Christian Stewardship is sometimes seen as a kind of burden imposed on us. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, it is an invitation to celebrate the joy of living and loving in Christ, in which our sacrifice of our time, talents and treasure is offered to build his kingdom.

## ***St Michael and All Angels***

### ***29th September***

"What did you do in the war, Daddy?" asked the poster which aimed to stimulate each person's contribution to the national struggle for survival in the Second World War. There was a very strong sense of 'us' and 'them', and, as is so often the case, 'we' were the 'good guys', and there was very little to be said in favour of 'them'. It was essential to stand together.

Those of my generation or older will remember that one aspect was rationing – indeed, some who are younger, and who knew the fuel crises of the 1970's may do so. You may also remember how unpopular it was – except with the 'let's all enjoy being equally miserable' brigade! In the wartime – and immediate post-war – situation, it was essential to ensure basic provision of essentials for all. It was also easy for some people to abuse – a friend of mine was based at an RAF station which had a canal as one perimeter, and every night, rabbits reared on the grassy spaces between the runways were covertly exchanged for chocolate and tobacco with the slow-moving barges! It was said that the Military Police were the most active in this trade!

Stewardship invites us to move from an 'us and them' confrontation to an 'us and us' collaboration, in which resources can be shared. It used to be said that the church is an army in which there are just two groups – the generals and the Pay Corps! As with other armies, changing times mean that there is now a much leaner, but much more complex and highly resourced machine engaged in spiritual warfare. Far from being 'officers' and 'other ranks', we all share in a common commission through our baptism, which made us 'Christ's faithful soldiers and servants to the end of our lives'.

It is in this context, the context in which 'we offer you our souls and bodies as a living sacrifice', that our stewardship takes place. As we, by the choices we make, and the offerings we bring, play our part in this conflict wholeheartedly and without reserve – the image Jesus uses in his description of Nathaniel, quoting Psalm 32 – we shall know that, not only are we privileged to share in Christ's work, but that we can depend on all the resources of his father to sustain us.

## ***Ss Simon and Jude***

### ***28th October***

Human beings often suffer from what one writer has called 'the Edifice complex'. Faced with a pressing need of great complexity – famine relief, say, or world peace – the response is to put up a building as a monument to the efforts being made. Sometimes the Church seems to fall into this trap! We need to remember that the Church is what you have left when the building has burned down!

Groucho Marx once said, “Marriage is a wonderful institution – but who wants to live in an institution?” Whenever Jesus spoke of his Father’s kingdom, he used the images, not of an organisation, but a family. In our Gospel this morning, he reminds the apostles that they share in his work on an equal basis. Paul develops this theme; he contrasts the magnificence of the stone temples of Ephesus with the glory of the ‘living temple’ being built out of the members of the Church there.

What is the ‘glory’ of our church? Not the building, or the organ, or the wall paintings; not even the worship which we offer here, Sunday by Sunday. If you want to see the glory of this church, you need to look in the offices and workshops, the farms, and schools, and the homes in which we spend most of our time. It’s in the quality of the lives we live there that Jesus reveals his Father’s glory to the world.

So our stewardship, our use of our time, talents and treasure, is something that reaches out into every aspect of our lives. It is there that the fruit we are commanded to bear is to ripen.











