A Sermon

Preached

in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

Sunday, 12 June 2022

All Souls' College

Commemoration of Benefactors

Readings: Exodus 16. 1-18 2 Corinthians 8. 1-15

When is a gift simply a gift? We give each other Christmas presents, birthday presents, retirement gifts, wedding presents. But then we receive an invitation to dinner, 'We must take some flowers, a bottle of wine or some chocolates.' We damage the neighbour's fence. We repair it, and take round a little gift to apologise. Or then we are offered a gift by an acquaintance, and suddenly we find ourselves wondering whether this might be a bribe or a back-hander. Sometimes, gifts can seem less than innocent.

In a little book, published in the early twentieth century by the French social anthropologist, Marcel Mauss, the writer offers a meditation, an essay, on *The Gift.* Mauss was fascinated by the way in which people across many different cultures offer gifts to each other. And he argued that this pattern of exchange between individuals and groups created a pattern of obligation, with three distinctive elements: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to return.

Of course, the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, was suspicious of any gift that might anticipate some form of return. As he says in *The Metaphysics of Morals,* 'to be beneficent, that is, to promote the happiness of others in need according to one's means, without hoping for something in return, is everyone's duty.' But as we commemorate the College's benefactors today, we might do well to reflect on the question whether such a gift can ever be given?

In the ancient world, there was an expectation that gifts were to be reciprocated in gifts and favours. This principle of reciprocity was not simply private. It was public. In Greek city-states, leading families were expected not only to take on public roles like the role of a magistrate. They were also expected to be public benefactors, to perform acts of voluntary service, *'leitourgiai'*, liturgies. This might take the form of the construction and refurbishment of a new gymnasium, the provision of military equipment, or the dedication of a temple.

In his book *Paul and the Gift,* Professor John Barclay points out: 'In most cities, where taxation was inadequate for 'extraordinary' expenses, these burdens were shouldered by a small number of wealthy families, whose unequal status was tolerated by their fulfilment of such services.' The 'return' for this generosity was public honour: front seats at public events, wreaths, statues, and crucially, all of this

inscribed on stone or metal so that there was a permanent public record of the generosity of the benefactor. (It is all beginning to sound very familiar). And because a question of honour was at stake, it was important that the benefactor should identify a suitably worthy recipient of their benefaction. In Aristotle's view, a generous person will give lavishly but certainly not indiscriminately. It had to be a 'noble' cause, thoroughly respectable, if the donor was to secure the honour desired. The honour of the donor and the prestige of the recipient mattered. The benefaction was intended to secure a commensurate response. But there can be no doubt about the fact that there were strings attached.

In our reading from St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes to the church in Corinth in the hope that they will emulate the churches of Macedonia and make a generous donation to a gift to the church in Jerusalem. In the year 51, Paul had visited Jerusalem for a second time in his career as an apostle, taking with him his assistant, Titus, a Gentile convert. Titus became the focus of a dispute between Paul and the 'pillars' of the church in Jerusalem: were Paul's converts to observe the works of the Law? Were they to adopt Jewish practices in relation to food or by accepting circumcision? The intricacies of this dispute were to exercise Paul's mind for some time, but in Jerusalem Paul agreed with James, Cephas and John, that he would continue in his ministry to the Gentiles and would not require them to convert to Judaism by accepting circumcision. This agreement was something of a triumph for Paul. The acknowledged 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church assented, but they did make one request: as Paul says in his letter to the Galatians – 'They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do' (Galatians 2.10).

Of course, almsgiving was paradoxically – given the context – one of the expectations of the Law. The Torah's legislation regarding the poor, the widow and the orphan had created a Jewish ethic of 'almsgiving' which was distinctive in the ancient world. That said, it is intriguing that Paul seeks to persuade the Corinthians to give generously to the collection, not only because there needed to be 'a fair balance between their present abundance and the needs of the poor in Jerusalem', but because this collection represented an expression of Christian unity. This gift was to become a symbol of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles, a visible witness to the unity of the church. In other words, this was a gift with strings attached.

The Commemoration of Benefactors is perhaps a moment to reflect on the history of this college, and to remember with thanksgiving the generosity of many benefactors over the years. It is also a moment to acknowledge that these benefactions often came with strings attached. Some of those strings are evident from the character of the benefaction – a focus on a particular area of research, the endowment of a chair

in a particular discipline, the development of a new generation of young scholars… or maintaining a college for study and a chantry for prayers for the souls of the faithful departed.

Sometimes these strings may be less evident. Occasionally, with the passage of time, a benefaction can begin to take on a rather different complexion. I know that many of you have been wrestling with these issues in recent years, and all of us are wrestling with the legacy of Britain's imperial past. This is not easy. It is uncomfortable. Across the University, huge efforts are made to ensure that donations and research funding are subject to appropriate review. As someone who also has to engage in fundraising, I am aware of the delicate discussions and negotiations that surround the whole business of development and donations, and the obligations which often follow the reception of a gift. But before we rehearse the familiar pattern of reparation and recrimination that this discussion can sometimes generate, I can't help wondering whether the Commemoration of Benefactors in a Chantry Chapel alerts us to the 'redemptive' quality of a gift?

Of course, a Chantry Chapel itself provokes some interesting questions about our theologies of redemption. The legacy of the Reformation reminds us that speaking of money and redemption in the same sentence can often generate more heat than light. There is a risk of a visiting preacher stumbling into an area where angels may fear to tread. But here's the thing. In our New Testament reading, when Paul speaks of a gift or a benefaction, he speaks also of 'grace'. He uses the word repeatedly to describe the generous undertaking of gathering a collection for the poor. Its use perhaps places Paul's little fundraising enterprise in a much broader perspective. For Paul, this exercise is much more than the practice of ordinary virtue. It is an enterprise which is infused with divine grace. It is a response to the sheer overwhelming abundance of God's gift in Jesus Christ. In grace, we discover the possibility of redemption. In grace, the old order of sin and death is overcome. In grace, we discover a love which is generous and liberal, bountiful and benevolent. God's grace is never frugal or calculating. It is not thrifty or parsimonious. It is lavish and extravagant. It falls like manna from heaven. We discover an abundance, an abundance which does not overwhelm us or constrain us, an abundance which sets us free.

Paul reminds us that grace provides the proper context for our giving, for our generosity, for all the graces we bestow upon one another. God's infinite agency provides the proper context for our finite agency. (These things are not mutually exclusive). Perhaps the only response is one of gratitude, of thanksgiving, but we need to acknowledge that the discipline of gratitude changes us. The discipline of gratitude has the potential to transform us and to shape our moral vision. That is why we gather in this place today. As we celebrate the indescribable and

incalculable gift of God's love and commemorate the benefactors of this college today, perhaps it is worth reflecting on the discipline of gratitude which lies at the heart of the Christian faith: 'for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich'. To whom, therefore, with the Father and the Spirit, one God in three Persons, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and power, henceforth and for ever. Amen.