

+ In the name of the Father...

Some of you may have seen the story reported in the news earlier this month of a woman and two young children who went into a jewellery shop to sell a gold ring. The mother was visibly distraught at having to part with her treasured possession. But she explained to the jeweller that she had no choice if she was to pay her bills.

Hearing her story, the jeweller refused to buy the ring for re-sale. Instead he reached into his own pocket and gave her precisely what she had asked for as she sought to sell the ring from his own money. He then said she must keep the ring and so he handed it back to her.

The stunned recipient broke down in tears at this astonishing act of kindness. The store's surveillance footage – in a video that has gone viral on YouTube – shows her hugging the jeweller. Interviewed afterwards the man said he was delighted to help her and would like to assist the woman further should she need anything.

What a remarkable act of generosity this was, a gesture of compassion, kindness and self-sacrifice, made freely and without expectation of reward.

For St Paul generosity is one of the fruits of the spirit, alongside love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and faithfulness. And in his letter to the church in Corinth from which we have just heard, the apostle tells us to practice generosity without reluctance or compulsion. For God, he insists, loves a *cheerful* giver.

So often we fail to heed this exhortation. Our temptation is to be human versions of the dragon in his cave who hoards and protects, keeping our treasures to ourselves. Too often we feel the pull of our selfish hearts and resent the needs of those around us, as if they might contaminate or stain us. Too often we give sparingly – whether this is our time, our talents, our possessions, our money, our hearts. Why should we do otherwise? we may secretly ask ourselves.

Well St Paul again points out just why we should be cheerful givers. For it is a blessing to be generous.

*The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly,
and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

We may feel we have little to give. Yet if we open our hearts to the neighbour, the one near to us and to the one further afield, we will find riches in this act.

The blessing is in loving self-sacrifice, the act of denying ourselves, turning away from the clamour of the ego for attention, safety and security and of taking up our cross and following the path which Jesus has set for, for this is the path which is none other than the way of peace.

As individuals we are invited to find this generous heart in ourselves and to give with cheerfulness as we can. And equally we need collectively to find this generous spirit in our society where so many are vulnerable, isolated, impoverished and at the receiving end of intolerance and hatred.

Isn't it remarkable how often it is the poorest who give the most. Jesus himself, of course, tells us that the widow's mite is worth more than the extravagant, but proportionately less generous, gifts of the wealthy.

Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Returning to the account of the generous jeweller, there is another remarkable aspect of this story. For, it turns out that the man who was so kind to the lady who sought to sell her gold ring was himself a Syrian refugee. Interviewed after the act he brushed aside suggestions that he had done something remarkable and simply said that he wanted to express to another the kindness he had received in finding a home and a job after fleeing a war-torn country.

His act points in an important sense to the Christian understanding of God's generosity to us all, which must always be the basis of the kindness we are invited to show to others. For Jesus was, of course, himself a refugee. In a very real and practical sense he fled to Egypt with his mother Mary when he was a baby to escape the threat of King Herod.

Yet, more fundamentally, Jesus travelled as the Son of God in all his glory to the far country of human sorrow, destitution and mortality in order to be one with us and so bring us salvation and the hope of heaven. Jesus travelled into the shame of the human condition, making himself sin for us, dying for us on the cross and descending into the very depths of hell in order to conquer our great adversary, death.

This is the gratuitous generosity of God; whose love reaches out to us in our weakness through that same very same human weakness.

St Paul again:

For you know the generous act 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.

It is the gift of God to humanity in Jesus that makes us rich not the acquisition of material wealth. This gift of God, which is granted to us, without any merit on our part.

God's love is indiscriminate, issued without favour to all people, given unconditionally to each of us that we should be healed, made whole and live in love and service to one another and in fellowship with God.

For as Paul wrote elsewhere, *there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.*

Like the Syrian refugee jeweller, we are implored to pass on the kindness that has been given to us. And this is none other than the love of God.

The grounding in love and mercy, the foundation of God's gift to us is what we are invited to show to others... with cheerfulness and generosity.

Let us pray to receive that generous and cheerful spirit in our hearts and in our actions.

Holy God,
when our memories blot out your kindness
and we ignore your patient love,
remember us, re-make us, and give to us poor sinners
the rich inheritance of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.