

# **GENEROUS**

# **LENT**

## **Sample Sermon 2**



# WEEK TWO: SAMPLE SERMON GENEROUS LENT

## FIRST READING:

Exodus 16:6-15

## SECOND READING

2 Corinthians 9:6-8, 10-12

## GOSPEL READING

Mark 6:30-44

We come to the second sermon in Generous Lent. Our Gospel reading is the well-known story of the Feeding of the 5,000. Notice that, just like last week, we are in the desert with Jesus. That's the place where we do serious business with God.

This is an important story. It's the only miracle of Jesus told in all four Gospels. It's a story important to Mark because he comes back to it a few times. In Generous Lent it is an important story. In the midst of scarcity God gifts abundance and the story includes the most beautiful and powerful image of what it means to be a steward of all God gives to us.



*Copyright control The University of Manchester*

## BEATRICE SCHILLING

So, let's start by talking about carburettors! It's the bit of the engine that sucks the petrol out of the tank and makes your car wheels go round. In the Merlin Rolls Royce engine fitted to Spitfires in the early 1940s the carburettor made the propeller go round. It was simple, cheap and it did the job - until it didn't. In June 1940 when Messerschmitt 109s went into a negative G roll Spitfire engines shut down because of the carburettor. The RAF [1] turned Beatrice Shilling, one of the few female engineers around. Shilling invented what's still today called the Shilling Restrictor. It was a washer; it worked. It was fitted as standard from around the end of 1942.

Now, small things like a washer or five loaves and two fish can make a world of difference. Every one of us needs to bring before God what we have. Some can bring a lot, some can only bring a little. When we give them to Jesus, it makes the difference. Except, the story of Beatrice Shilling doesn't end.

The Shilling Restrictor solved a huge problem. But if people had listened to Beatrice before the war started, there wouldn't have been a problem to solve. She had already pretty much perfected a 1931 design by AA Griffith for what was basically the first fuel injected carburettor. (When it finally went into mass production (in 1943?) it was named after a male engineer, the Hobson Injection Carburettor.)

Beatrice Shilling solved a problem but her skills helped open up new possibilities. The miracle of the loaves and fish has more to teach us than bringing a little to Jesus. So, let's have a look.

*[1]Actually the RAE, the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough. Founded as the Army Balloon Factory in 1906 it became the Royal Aircraft Factory in 1912 and was renamed RAE in 1918 to avoid confusion with the newly created Royal Air Force.*

## 1. WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

This was not the first time that God had met the physical needs of his people in the desert. Everyone there would know the story of the manna from the Old Testament book of Exodus. A hungry people receive food in the desert. Their physical needs are met but there is more going on. Moses and Aaron tell the people that in the morning, when they gather the manna bread they shall see not only food but the glory of the Lord (Ex 16:6). Physical things carry spiritual meaning.[1]

Now, when Mark wrote his Gospel and when the story was told to the early Church they would have been well aware of another story which has shaped how Mark tells this story of the Feeding of the 5,000. Look at what Mark writes in v41:

*Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples*

What does that remind us of? These are the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper and the actions of the Priest at every communion service when bread is broken in worship. And if we look at Acts 27:35 a simple meal after a shipwreck also involves Paul taking, blessing and breaking bread. Physical things carry deep, spiritual reality. Holy Communion is a sacrament; our shared meals of hospitality and fellowship have a sacramental character. They speak of the life of Jesus in us and among us.

It's the same with our money and possessions. We need these things to live in this world. But how we live with them is about how we follow Jesus. We can't say money is not a spiritual matter. We can't say it has nothing to do with worship or following Jesus. Living faithfully as stewards of what God gives us is as much a part of discipleship as saying our prayers, reading our Bibles, worshipping in church. And when we give our giving is not a sacrament but it does have a sacramental character. It is an outward symbol of a spiritual meaning. When we give generously we are saying that God is the owner and the giver of all we have.



[1]The Feeding miracle in John's Gospel makes this connection with the story of the manna crystal clear (John 6:30-35).

## 2. DISCIPLESHIP MEANS MAKING GOOD DECISIONS

Our reading begins with Mark 6:30: The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Earlier in chapter 6 Jesus had sent the Twelve to preach the Gospel. They come back excited and exhausted. They want time with Jesus but there are just too many things going on. So Jesus says to his disciples, 'Come, by yourselves, to a solitary place'. Mark uses the same phrase, solitary place, again in verse 32 and verse 35. It is an echo of the OT story of the manna. And this solitary place they have space to talk and time to eat.

Mark could have gone straight from there to the miracle story, but he doesn't. Instead he tells the grisly story of a lavish birthday party, a King who cannot decide about John the Baptist and who is forced to execute him by his wife. Mark wants us to see the contrast. On the one hand, Jesus sends the disciples with no more than a staff in their hand and sandals on their feet. They must trust God to provide and not be distracted as they share the Gospel. On the other hand, Mark shows us the conspicuous wealth and lack of morality at Herod's palace.

Discipleship means making good choices, and that includes how we live with our money and possessions. All I know is that sometimes we get those decisions right, sometimes we don't. But we do have to make them. Now, generous discipleship is not just choosing between sandals and scandals! We're not asked to choose between having nothing and wanting everything. Life is more complex than that. Our discipleship choices about being faithful stewards of money are much richer than giving it all away.

The passage says something important about making our discipleship decisions. Jesus invited the disciples to find a rhythm in their discipleship. There is the busyness of their mission and meeting the needs of the crowd. And there is a stepping back to find rest, refreshment and renewal. That godly rhythm it is so important to our physical health, our mental health, to healthy relationships and much more. We can't be living on the edge all the time.

And the story tells us not only what this rhythm looks like but also, why it matters. In verse 30 the Twelve are called Apostles and they teach – this is the only time that they are called that in Mark's Gospel and the only time anyone other than Jesus teaches. But when it comes to the miracle of the loaves and fish they just don't get it. Were the disciples so exhausted that their spiritual senses were dulled. Faced with the needs of the crowd they felt overwhelmed when Jesus asked them to feed the crowd themselves. They couldn't see the miracles that was possible or the significance of the miracle for who Jesus was as Messiah (Mk 6:52).



Lent is the season in our Christian year when we are invited to make the time and space in our lives to think about our discipleship choices. Lent is part of the steady rhythm of the Christian calendar. Lent invites us to slow down, to think and reflect so that we can make good discipleship decisions. So that we can find times of resting and refreshing.



This matters because we don't make good decisions when we are exhausted or busy or pressured. So, we don't always make good giving decisions in the day to day business of living, especially when we are under financial pressure or our church is under financial pressure. Like all life, like all discipleship there is a rhythm to our generous discipleship. Generous Lent is an invitation to stop and think and pray and decide with space and time what good giving to the life and ministry of our church looks like: for me, today, in my own circumstances.

### 3. SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

For Jesus the crowd are like sheep without a shepherd and he has compassion on them. Interestingly, compassion is the same word that is used elsewhere in the gospels in connection to Jesus' healing and to the compassion that forgives financial debt (Mt 18:27). Again, there is no division between spiritual and worldly concerns.

Look at the way the problem of a large crowd and no food is handled by the Twelve and by Jesus. It's not that the disciples don't care for the people; of course they do. They know they are hungry and it is late. The obvious solution is in v36 and again in v37: send them to buy food. It makes sense but Jesus sees it differently: you give them something to eat.

The disciples cannot believe what they hear. They cannot begin to imagine how to meet the need. They feel overwhelmed by the size of the problem and the scarce resources they have to solve it. Instinctively and understandably, the disciples calculate the monetary cost: it would cost 200 coins, six months wages to feed this lot!

This is the stewardship challenge facing many churches today. We're recovering from Covid and living with a cost of living crisis and massive heating bills. The financial needs of our church can seem overwhelming. Resourcing the ministry opportunities we have can seem impossible with our scarce resources. The challenge in this Gospel reading, you give them something to eat, can provoke our incredulity, frustration, irritation and even opposition.

And like the disciples, understandably we think about financial transactions. We think about balancing the church budget. But the miracle of the loaves asks us to see things differently. It asks us to shift our thinking from scarcity to abundance. To think less about financial transactions and more about transformational generosity. To shift from thinking about pragmatic decisions and to think more of deciding to trust in God's abundant, generous provision.

It is not about financial foolishness or irresponsibility. Stewards don't do that. Churches must balance their budgets. But it is about changing our thinking, changing our hearts, changing the way we speak about money. It's moving our thinking from the transactional to the transformational power of generosity.

### 3. BLESSED AND BROKEN

Finally, let's look at Jesus' response. He's not angry at a lack of vision or understanding among his disciples. Instead he does two things. First, he asks them what they do have: five loaves and two fish. Second, the people are gathered in a place of scarcity so Jesus asks the disciples to organise the people to be ready for abundance.

Jesus takes, blesses and breaks the bread in 6:41 and then Jesus gives to the disciples. This is the heart of Holy Communion; we kneel with open hands to receive all that God has done for us in Jesus. Then the disciples share what has been given to them.

This simplicity of receiving what Jesus gives and sharing generously is the heart of stewardship. There is no more beautiful picture of stewardship in the Bible. Everything we have, including our money and possessions, are God's gift and they come into our hands blessed and broken. They are blessed because God is the creator, owner and giver of all good things; given for our enjoyment and to be received with contentment and gratitude (1 Tim 6:7-10, 17-19). They are broken because our money and possessions, like every part of our life, is caught up in God's grace to us in Jesus who lived, died and rose again so that we might live life in all its fullness.

Stewardship is so much more than giving a little of our time and our talents and our treasure to God. It is so much more than paying for the life of our church. To be a steward, to be a generous disciple is to give all we are to God because he has given everything to us. At the heart of generous discipleship is worship and praise. Our giving is part of our worship and that worship connects with our ministry and mission and a world hungry for justice. That's why in our Epistle today Paul says that generous giving not only meets human need but is also abundant, rich, packed with thanksgiving to God.

### 5. SNOWFLAKES

It's time to come into land, so a final observation and a story to close if we have time. There is a promise here. Mark tells us that, all ate and were filled. This is a reference to Deuteronomy 8:10, God's promise of abundance for Israel in a new land. It is a promise to you and to me, to our church and to our parish and the wider world. And there is no suggestion in the story that the crowd knew a miracle had happened. Hungry people were fed but the miracle was invisible, unseen.



*In Prague, in 1611 a bitterly cold man called Johannes Kepler watched a snowflake land on his coat. He was brilliant, mathematician to the Holy Roman Emperor- who didn't always pay his wages. Kepler had no money but wanted to give a New Year gift to his friend (a Scouser?) Wacker von Wackfels. As a joke he thought he would give his friend a book about, nothing; perhaps a grain of sand or a drop of water.*

*But crossing the Charles Bridge in Prague a snowflake landed on his coat. People already knew snowflakes were six sided stars. Kepler got to thinking why this was so. Why not five, or seven? His conjecture was right, it took 400 years to explain why. Kepler thought there must be a six sided hexagon involved, because a hexagon is the most efficient use of space, like bees creating a honeycomb.*

*At the heart of every snowflake is a hexagon. The hexagon is created by electromagnetism, the two hydrogen atoms and the one oxygen atom. In the clouds, water vapour meets specks of dust or pollen and the molecules create a hexagon shape. It has rough edges so as it falls with gravity it attracts more water molecules which attach to the edges of the hexagon giving the six sided shape of a snowflake. The shape of each snowflake is formed by the humidity and temperature in the air through which it falls. So every snowflake is different. And every snowflake has symmetry, you can cut it like a cake into identical fragments. This symmetry is found everywhere in nature. (And, every snowflake is actually not white but transparent. They only look white because they have so many edges and the edges catch the light, giving the appearance of colour. [1])*

Why tell this story? Because every snowflake is created a few simple and essential laws of physics. But every snowflake is individual because of its own journey to land on you and me.

Generous discipleship is formed through some simple biblical principles we see in this story. Everything we have is a gift from God. We receive it with gladness and gratitude; we hold what we have and live with what we have as those who know we have been saved by God's grace in Jesus' death and resurrection.

But generous discipleship for you and me will be as unique as a snowflake. Formed by the same biblical principles for each of us, generous discipleship will look a little different but will be beautiful in every way as we hold all that we have as blessed and broken. So three quick questions, for each of us as individuals and for us as a church:

1. The *why we give* question is this: this Lent, can we choose to give generously as a spiritual discipline which trusts God's provision in the desert of hard times and as our worship and praise. All we receive comes to us, blessed and broken.
2. The *when we give* question is this: are we 'organised for abundance', like in the story? That's why we encourage everyone to use the Parish Giving Scheme as simple and safe to us and the most efficient and effective way to give to our church.
3. The *what we give* question is this: does what we give to God's work in this church reflect the blessings God has given us and the sacrificial giving of Jesus who gave his life that we might live?

What's the one, single step we can take today to continue on our journey into generous discipleship? Like a snowflake, your journey is shared with others but is your journey, unique and special and valued. Amen.