

Sermon for Trinity 22 (19th October 2008)

[Begin by playing the 'Tax collector' game. Asking for different levels of taxes. Unfair.]

People don't like to pay taxes, especially if they think they're not fair, or if someone else is getting rich while we're getting poorer. This was a trap to trick Jesus into giving the wrong answer, but he didn't fall for it. He firmly reminded the people that they were to give their best to God.

What's your best that you could give to God? Draw, write about it. Bring it later to offer to God.

Lots of people regard parish share as a tax by the central church on local churches, so we don't like paying it.

We can't see what we're getting for our taxes and we resent them and the people who make us pay them.

I want to spend a few minutes explaining what the parish share is, why we pay it and what we get for it. I hope that will make it easier for us as a church to feel we can pay it with gracious and generous hearts, and not grudgingly because we have to.

What is it? Parish share is the name given to the amount of money local churches have to pay in to central church funds. The total amount of money needed to fund ministry in all the churches across the diocese is divided between the number of deaneries (that's the smaller groupings of churches) and then the deanery decides how much each church will pay each year.

How much is it for us? Our parish share this year is £49,062.

What do we get for that money? Well, me really. The cost of me for a year is actually £56,599 and the cost of Mary for a year is £1,776, excluding the cost of her training. Actually neither of us gets anywhere near that amount of money. I receive a stipend, the cost of my housing paid by the diocese, and Mary is free to the parish because she's what is called a non-stipendiary curate (that mean's she volunteers her time and ministry to the church – and good value she is too).

So actually, this parish is getting a vicar and a curate and only paying for a vicar.

The parish share also pays for all the support staff at Church House in Oxford, clergy training and pensions for clergy who have give their whole lives for the service of the church, often at significant sacrifice to themselves and their families. I don't receive a pension yet, and to be honest I'm not ever expecting one, but I do make full use of the support from Church House and the training I need to be able to be a better spiritual leader for St Mary's and the people of Burghfield.

Another thing is that the parish share for places like Burghfield and the other parishes in this deanery are weighted so that we subsidize less well-off parishes like Whitely Wood in Reading and the Slough parishes where I've come from. The people in these parishes are genuinely poor and it's right and proper that other parishes pay for them to have a vicar that they can't afford to pay for.

I believe we get very good value from our parish share payment. Maybe you don't think we do - well, let's talk it over if that's what you think.

Earlier this year this church made a decision to appoint a full-time priest for this church. The cost of that post is £56,599, you're being asked to pay £49,062 towards that cost this year. Next year, of course it will go up, about 2%. I want to help this church grow and encourage and equip you to spread God's word in this parish and through your daily lives. I will do all I can to do that and be the supportive, prayerful and strong leader you want. I can't do that long-term, if we don't pay our parish share.

As I said last week, and to a few people during the week. I'm not here to maintain a church, I'm here to ensure that it thrives; I'm not here to be focused on money and internal pressures from the church, I'm here to spread the gospel in this community and help you to do the same. At the moment I'm spending far too much time on the first and not anywhere near enough time on the second.

Please pray about how much you can increase your giving to support the cost of ministry in this church. If you're not a regular giver and you want to become one, ask me after the service for a pledge form.

I've said nothing this morning about our bible readings. I think they speak for themselves. The first one was about God's outrageous generosity to us: Paul says "You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us - in one stroke he became poor and we became rich." Paul commends the church in Corinth for its generosity to other, poorer churches, and to funding the work of the gospel.

In the gospel reading Jesus doesn't sidestep the issue of money or the people's resentment about paying taxes to maintain an occupying force, he doesn't even sidestep that the Pharisees are setting a trap for him, but he reminds them that it's right and proper to give to God the things that belong to God. And, brothers and sisters, what's due to God is our love and generosity in return for his generosity to us.

I'll end with some of Paul's words from our first reading: "You do so well in so many things - you trust God, you're articulate, you're insightful, you're passionate, you love us - now, do your best in this, too. I'm not trying to order you around against your will. But I am hoping to bring the best out of you."

Blessings,
Gill