**Sermon Transcript: David Williams, Bishop of Basingstoke**

**Week 4: Sowing and Reaping - 2 Corinthians 9:6-15**

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our series of sermons and our podcasts over this month of June, we've seen an astonishing journey of giving and grace, that Paul encourages the Corinthian church to take part in. I don't know if you like me, have been intrigued by the church in Macedonia. Probably the poorest Christian community, and yet one that in many people's eyes, gave more than they could afford to. They compromised their own ability to sustain their lives, because they saw a need in Jerusalem that they felt they had to respond to.

That on its own is a challenge to all of us. And we live in one of the wealthiest parts of the British Isles and unsurprisingly it’s a part of the country where music, the arts, creativity, commerce, entrepreneurial excellence all are in abundance. We're quite good at responding to things like the climate emergency. We use each other's gifts well and we rejoice in them. But what if we were also Known as the most generous community in the British Isles. For me that would be testimony of understanding the grace of God. Not that we simply accumulate more and more wealth for ourselves, but we become better known for excelling in our giving.

Paul, as he journeys through these chapters of two Corinthians, moves from that story the Macedonian church’s almost unimaginable generosity, a compromising of themselves in what they gave, through to an appeal to fair shares. Please give as you see other people are in need. I was struck reading the church times as I was preparing this material to see a challenge from David Ford, ought we as the Christian church be deploying our resources, and our clergy based on where the missional need is, rather than simply to meet the needs of a local community. I know in practice that's a conversation that goes on. And we hold both in tension, build up and equip the people of God in each place. But pay careful attention to where there's a need.

But Paul goes on a step further, and he now speaks of what it might be, to really commit, invest in the signs of the Kingdom of God the work of the Kingdom. He uses a proverb, that Jesus had used in a slightly different way, but he uses the analogy of a sower. You're sowing in and you're committing yourself. Your prayers, your time, your creativity, and your money, into the work of the church. And you pray to God, that coincides with discerning the signs of the kingdom in our midst.

It's a powerful - almost an example of language of commerce. Invest in something that brings return, except this is investing in the Kingdom of God. I can point you to many examples in the 30 years I've been in ministry where people have astounded me. Giving actually almost an embarrassingly huge sum of money into some area of work. I've been embarrassed because it seemed disproportionate. I remember serving a meal on a marriage course and someone leaving me a check for several thousand pounds. At the end of the meal after I thought this is out of all proportion to what this person has received but a brief note said, please use this to underwrite this ministry in the years to come. I think that for me was a clear example of sewing into what you see God's work doing. And part of the challenge for us as the church is to see that it’s something we need to do in this generation. Some of us, particularly the older

members of the community, arguably have never had it so good. Our asset

values, our income, our pensions will be the envy of our children and our

grandchildren. Ought we to reflect something of that in how we respond to

ensuring that the church can reach our children and our grandchildren's

generation? Commit, sew into the life both in the present and for the future.

I think that's what Paul is saying in this chapter. He then talks about what the seed is and

many ways I've already covered that. In our conversation about the use of our money and our possessions, it is the whole of it; it's our gifts, our hospitality and our creativity as well. The ability to give of ourselves to what we see God doing in our midst.

I'm always struck by the last four verses of Acts chapter 2. It's a beautiful picture of an early Christian community deepening their life in God. They gather together to listen to the apostles teaching. They pray together, they break bread together, they meet in the temple courts. They deepen their own spiritual life. There's clearly a deepening relationship between them. They meet in each other's homes. They eat meals together in each other's homes. They praise God together in each other's homes. But then almost unselfconsciously, they commit to the wider community. It says they sold land and possessions and brought money to the life of the church, bringing it to the feet of the apostles. What do they do with that money? The next phrase is: nobody was in need in their community. They seem to instinctively have provided for those who need.

To other phrases in that early picture of the church in Jerusalem. People spoke well of them. And daily, people were added to their number as they got saved. That's what it means today, I believe, to invest in the people of God.

Sometimes slightly mischievously, I visit a parish and I go without a dog collar. I call into the local pub. I am quite an extrovert and I try and get into a conversation. And I slightly mischievously asked, “what's the local church like?” And thank God, often I hear very positive answers. They're kind people, they're generous people. They make a difference to this community. That's what happens in Jerusalem. That's what it means for the people have God to invest into what the church is doing locally. And then Paul goes on to glimpse the harvest. What will be the result? The answer is we don't know. But we trust that God will bring it. There is a journey of trust as we give of ourselves to a local church and indeed to a community of communities that is a diocese. We don't know God will do. But I do know both from the testimony of my own life and from scriptures that God answers our prayers beyond our capacity to either ask or imagine.

And so, I'm going to ask you in the at the end of this Generous June to prayerfully make a series of responses. Responses about what you are committed to, what you will renew in your commitment particularly as we come out of this pandemic, and re-shape many of the features of our own Church. I wonder if you would hear God's call to you personally. Paul speaks about community. He speaks about churches in cities. But he also speaks, and I think God's word does that to us today, deeply and personally: what does this mean to you? I hope that in the course of this month, you, like me, have become compelled by a vision of an authentic generosity. Because I think whenever the giving comes from that authentic generosity based on the grace of God is no longer about paying a membership fee to be part of a club, is no longer meeting a rational response to a declared need. It’s something much deeper is going on.

It’s about giving myself, my prayers and my money into the life of this local

community.

And so, at the end of this month I want to ask you to prayerfully review your

own financial commitments. I have huge respect for those who quietly,

anonymously, unselfconscious give whenever they're prompted to give, but

I wonder if together we can offer a tangible, generous commitment to our own

local church in 2021.

Where would you start? Well personally I found it often helps to start with a single significant generous gift. That does something to me it does something to my soul. When I give probably slightly beyond what I can afford to give.

But then secondly, I think it's important for me to review my giving and to review the regularity of that giving and how much it is. I think each year, particularly if my financial commitments have lessened a bit as my children have grown up, I ought to be in a position to give more generously, to give a larger sum of money and that ought to be regular and proportionate.

I think we ought to be sensitised particularly coming out of this pandemic, to individual and communities’ financial circumstances. Some of us they will have changed dramatically. I just want to say that if your income has decreased, then it may well be that you reduce the amount you give but you are actually still giving more generously than you ever have before. I hope that makes sense.

But it's always I think the experience of a radical generosity that begins to so transform our understanding of God's love. There is a very simple phrase you can't out give God. I wonder if we are called this this year to put that to the test.

Shall we pray:

Father you gave everything in Jesus Christ to us. The one who though he was rich became poor for our sakes. So farther would you reshape my own understanding of who you are. Would you reshape what it is that I depend upon. And Lord may my giving begin to reflect more fully that experience of grace that you first gave yourself for me.

In the name God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.