A Harvest of Righteousness

*A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 8:16-9:15*

Last week at St George’s we read through the first fifteen verses of chapter eight of Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. In these verses he began by telling the Corinthians of his humbling experience of fundraising for the benefit of Jewish Christians living in Judaea among the hard-pressed congregations of Macedonia. Having finished his work among the Macedonians he was now preparing to visit Corinth, and was sending his co-worker Titus on ahead of him so that the Corinthians should have time to gather together what they had pledged to give when Paul had floated the idea of taking up such a collection the previous year.

This week’s passage falls quite neatly into three sections, which in turn will supply us with the three parts of this sermon. In vv. 16-24 of chapter eight Paul explains why this letter of his is coming to them not only with its carrier, Titus, whom they know, but also with another two men who, given that they’re not named by Paul, are presumably unknown to the Corinthians. In vv. 1-5 of chapter nine he alerts the Corinthians that when he himself joins them shortly he may well be accompanied by one or more Macedonians delegates overseeing their part of the contribution to the Judaean Christians. Then in vv. 6-15 of the same chapter he seeks to encourage the Corinthians’ generosity by appealing to God’s character as one who himself gives generously. Let’s dive in!—

Part One

*Probity*

Paul begins by alluding to Titus as, one presumes, the bearer of the letter the Corinthians are having read out to them. Titus was known to the Corinthians: he’d spent time among them in the past, and is the source of Paul’s knowledge of the Corinthians’ repentance that he wrote to them about back in chapter seven. Then he goes on to explain the presence among them of two more Christians (he calls them ‘brothers’) who have accompanied Titus with Paul’s letter. Read with me, then, from v. 18:—

And we are sending along with him (that is, with Titus) the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honour the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord, but also in the eyes of man.

Leaving to one side the second man, whom Paul goes on to talk about in the next verse, what do we find out about this first man, and why has he arrived in the Corinthians’ midst?

Paul describes him as one ‘praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel’. Probably the simplest way to understand this is that the man is an evangelist, or missionary, who has been active in churches in a number of different cities, and has in this way gained the confidence of many Christians. If Paul has been raising funds for the Collection in the Roman province of Asia, which seems likely, then perhaps the man is a representative of this group of churches. Paul also tells us that he has been ‘chosen to accompany us as we carry the offering’, and is doing so that that Paul may be able to avoid any criticism that he has been making improper use of the money that has been raised and before it can make its way safely to the Christians in Judaea. Paul then says that he is keen to do the right thing, ‘not only in the eyes of the Lord, but also in the eyes of man.’

For the more cynical among us, this is all going to sound a little like an exercise in what’s nowadays known as ‘optics’: a desire, first and foremost, to be *seen* to be doing the right thing, and in which the actual goodness of whatever it is we’re doing is of only secondary importance. For what it’s worth, here is my take on what’s going on here. Paul does indeed have multiple aims in view by taking up the Collection, but he does genuinely care about poverty in the church in Judaea, particularly when members of the largely Gentile church he’s founded elsewhere are living in comparative affluence. Secondly, I think it quite possible that the delegates from the churches in Asia and, as we’ll see in chapter nine, from churches in Macedonia, also, have been chosen, not at Paul’s insistence, but at the insistence of the churches themselves. Paul’s converts in Asia and Macedonia may well have been aware that Paul’s relations with the church in Judaea were occasionally strained, and that his relationship with the church in Corinth was deteriorating. They thus insisted Paul expand the team entrusted with delivering the Collection to Judaea so that there would be respected men from numerous churches on hand to vouch for Paul should anyone allege that Paul had dipped his hand into the proceeds raised. In other words, I’m suggesting that the role of the people being referred to in this passage is to prevent baseless accusations being made against Paul by his detractors in various segments of the wider church.

What we’re talking about can be captured nicely by the word *probity*. *Probity* is a word most commonly used nowadays in financial circles to refer to that happy state of affairs when the money that passes through a given organisation can all be accounted for. No one has lost anything; no one has pilfered anything; no one has been put in a comprising position by having to take sole charge of money matters. Probity is about not only doing the right thing, but also being able to show evidence of the fact that you have done the right thing. And it’s not difficult to think of many other areas of life where probity has its place. In an election, representatives from the various political parties contesting a ballot might be given access to the tally-room, so that they will be able to assure their leaders that no tampering with votes has taken place. In a church that has historically failed to protect children, stringent protocols might be put in place around the selection and training of kids’ church leaders and the way that ministry with children takes place. In other words, probity is for people who want to do the right thing where levels of trust are low, or, indeed where trust is high, but it’s important that such trust not be squandered.

I think the take-home for us is to be willing think through a given course of action and how it may be perceived by others before we set out to do it. In other words, communicate to others what you’re trying to achieve. Make it easy for people to ask you questions about what you’re doing before you begin, so they don’t have to ask awkward questions once you’ve finished. Do what you do alongside others. Encourage feedback. Probity isn’t everything but it is something. It might drive you nuts if you’re someone who likes seize opportunities and to act quickly, but it has its place and it’s a useful and biblical way of looking after each other. And that brings us to the second part of this sermon:—

Part Two

*Face*

Paul begins chapter nine by gently assuring the Corinthians of his confidence in their generosity. In reality, of course, he has no such confidence, and is concerned that when he arrives in Corinth, the Corinthians, for all their enthusiasm for the Collection when he had raised it with them the previous year, may have lost interest in it altogether. This leaves Paul in a ticklish position, given that he’s evidently been using the Corinthians’ enthusiasm of the previous year as one way of increasing fervour for the Collection among the Macedonian congregations. But just as with the churches of Asia, so too will the churches in Macedonia be sending along with Paul, when he comes, a representative of their own who will be able to ensure the transparency of the venture in the eyes of any potential critics. But what if they arrive, only to find out that for all their talk, the Corinthians have in fact failed to be generous?

Now, it seems to me that there are two ways to think about what Paul is doing here. A suspicious reading of this passage might argue that Paul is appealing to the Corinthians’ sense of self-worth (that is, basically, their pride) in order to sting them into being generous as they had promised. And this is a genuine possibility: I’m sure there were times when Paul woke up in the middle of the night wanting to throttle those wretched Corinthians and may well have been tempted to take one of their faults, in this case, an exaggerated sense of self-importance, and at least put it to some use somewhere else in the church.

But it’s also possible to adopt a less suspicious reading of the text here, and that’s in fact what I want to suggest in this case. I think Paul is worried about the Corinthians losing face, about their being embarrassed in the eyes of others if their shortcomings are exposed for all to see. And I think that one of the ways we love people is to help them to avoid embarrassment in front of other people. It means talking to people privately early on, rather than having to speak publicly later. And this is a kindness that has often been extended to me, not only as a young Christian, when it’s usual to extend such kindness, but also as I’ve got older, and I think that when people are considerate in this way they show their maturity in Christ.

However, I think there is a danger here, nonetheless, and that is that by being overly sensitive to the ways that others may lose face if they fail to carry out what they’ve agreed to do, and anxiously stepping in continually to make sure they don’t stuff up, we can wind up disempowering people. People need to be able to fail in order to grow, and sometimes the wise course is to step back and allow a particular project to crash and burn in confidence that the experience of failure will generate growth for the future.

Now, obviously, this is an area that calls for discernment. In the first place, have a think about where you yourself lean on this axis! Do you assume that everyone is as robust as you are, and wind up being continually surprised at how your frankness of speech comes across as humiliating to others? Well, if that’s you, then you can benefit from Paul’s example in these verses. On other hand, if you find yourself constantly stepping in to situations in order to prevent others from failing, you might like to pray that God would help you to discern when to have a quiet word in private and when to step back and allow God to use failure to bring others to maturity. It’s not easy to know which to do sometimes, but let love be your guide!

In the second place, you might like to think about what would happen if you failed to intervene. If the stakes are not very high, that gives you more discretion about whether to act. If the stakes *are* high, as they are for Paul here, of course, then you probably *will* want to act, but to do so in a way that allows people wherever possible to save face. And this brings us to the third and final part of this sermon:—

Part Three

*A Harvest of Righteousness*

The final cluster of verses provide additional reasons for the Corinthians to be generous, mostly by drawing on material from the Old Testament’s store of wisdom literature. Read with me from v. 6:—

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

‘They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;

Their righteousness endures forever.’

Now he who supplies seed for the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed will enlarge the harvest of righteousness.

Verse six has a proverbial feel to it, with many near parallels in contemporary Graeco-Roman writers and in the Old Testament, and it basically amounts to the same thing as our own saying, ‘You get out what you put in.’ Sink large amounts of time into learning a musical instrument and you’ll open yourself up to a world you would otherwise never have been able to enter. Practice only once in a blue moon and you’ll find your enjoyment in your instrument quickly fades. Practice generosity only grudgingly and your heart will not be changed; be extravagantly and consistently generous and your whole life will be transformed.

Verse seven repeats Paul’s advice from earlier in chapter eight, namely, that it’s better to give gladly and of one’s own volition than out of the necessity to avoid being thought stingy or for fear of losing someone’s good opinion of you. Verse eight then seeks to encourage generosity by reminding the Corinthians that there are no limits to the extent that God is able to bless us specifically so that we will be able to continue to do good for others. Now, this isn’t to say that you won’t experience periods of fatigue or even burnout as a Christian, or that we don’t need to be careful when working out just how much to put on our plate at any one time, but it does mean that when contemplating ways of helping others we can afford to be more generous than we might at first suppose. As Paul goes on to say in v. 10, God is the one who supplies all our needs. He provides for us so generously because he loves us, of course, but he also does so that we may be generous ourselves, that we may ‘enlarge the harvest of our righteousness’, as he puts it at the end of the verse, which, given that the word ‘righteousness’, having just been used in Paul’s quotation from Psalm 112, must mean something like, ‘the gifts you freely give to the poor’, given that that’s what ‘righteousness’ is referring to in the psalm.

It’s worth pausing here to make a simple point. Our natural human instincts are to barter with God. We give him a sheep, so that he may give our flock protection from wild animals. We give him a portion of our income, so that he may give us financial security in a volatile economy. The God of the Old Testament and the New flips that way of thinking on its head. You can’t cut deals with this God, and in any case you don’t need to. God gives us everything we have, so that we can give to those who would otherwise go without.

Let me finish this morning by telling you about a passage from a book which Miriam and I read together earlier this year. The book is called *The Secret Garden*, and it hails from the classic age of British writing for children. It’s about a ten-year-old girl called Mary Lennox, who comes to live in an enormous and largely deserted English country house perched on the edge of the Yorkshire moors. Mary is an orphan, self-centred and hard, but her hardness softens once she discovers an abandoned, walled garden and begins to work in there in secret. Mary discovers the garden in winter, at a time when everything in it seems dead—everything, that is, save for the tiny green points she keeps finding sticking out of the ground, all choked with dead grass. Instinctively, she begins clearing space for them by pulling the grass away from them, and as the days pass she finds herself more and more absorbed by the garden. ‘It seemed to her,’ writes the author, ‘like a fascinating sort of play.’ Her first tentative steps as a gardener eventually translate into long days spent entirely outdoors, and I’ve been thinking: Maybe here is something of an analogy for how God works in our lives with regard to generosity!

We come into the garden as orphans. Everything seems dead, with only the most subtle signs of life visible. But working in the garden is absorbing. In the same way, our first steps in practicing generosity are halting, haphazard, hesitant. But at some point we fall under the spell it casts. Our lives centre less and less on our own affairs and we begin to find more room in them for others. There’s a discipline involved in returning to the same patch of ground week after week, but also a delight as you discover new things which you hadn’t noticed the previous week, or indeed, that have only just broken through the earth’s surface. Leaves unfurl, buds swell and break, and before you know it, summer is upon you and the garden holds more abundance than you would ever have thought it possible to bear. Your life is full of interest: you see beauty where before you saw only garden beds that needed weeding, brothers and sisters where before you had only seen people who might want something from you. You learn to avoid imposing your will on plants and begin to attend to whatever it is the plants themselves need. You stop thinking of people as projects and start thinking of them as co-workers or even as family. Your life becomes a fascinating sort of play, in which we repeat with increasing fluency and beauty of diction the lines our Heavenly Father has given us to say. Let’s pray:—

Father,

You are the giver of every good gift. Please transform us every day more and more into the likeness of your Son, Jesus Christ, who became poor that we might become rich, and givers in turn.

In His name, Amen.