

Hebrews 13. 1 -8 1st September 2019 Grovely Parish

I want to reflect this morning on the reading from the Letter to the Hebrew, but I would like to do this by telling you two stories. They are different stories, although there is a common theme to the stories.

My first story is a story told by Bishop Michael Marshall, a Church of England bishop living in the United States. The story is about the Dean of Lincoln cathedral, showing someone around the cathedral. Lincoln Cathedral is by the way, one of the great medieval cathedrals of Europe. The person, whom the Dean was showing around the Cathedral was a man called Professor Joad. Apparently for most of his life, Professor Joad was a militant atheist.

In the course of showing the professor around, the Dean said, "Let me show you, what is considered the finest carving in the cathedral." So they went up numerous sets of stairs, until they came to an area, just below the roof; in the top arches, which supported the beams of the ceiling. In the corner of one of those arches was the carved figure of Mary holding the Christ Child. It is a delicate work, of these two figures, somewhat elongated. It is a carving of beauty and craftsmanship.

What astonished the Professor was that this unknown craftsman had created this thing of beauty, not for the praise of man, because it was out of sight of most people, but for the glory of God. The professor was touched by the generosity of the craftsman that he should put so much skill, and time, and no doubt love into this work of art.

Extraordinary as it may seem, the Professor was changed by that medieval carving. It communicated to him the faith, and the love that this unknown craftsman had for God. The professor began to look again at his understanding of Christianity, and in time became a worshipping believer himself.

It was the generosity of skill by that unknown sculptor, of a figure way up in the roof of the cathedral that changed the Professor.

My second story is not so much a story as an observation. A little while ago, I re-read a short book, by Donald Coggan, the Archbishop

of Canterbury from 1974 – 1980. Donald Coggan’s book was called, “Meet Paul.” It is about St Paul, the apostle.

It’s a lovely book written by a man of deep faith. Bishop Coggan brought his own knowledge and love of Paul into his little book.

One of the things that Bishop Coggan strived to do in his book was to get people to look again at Paul. Donald Coggan felt that some people mistakenly believed that Paul was a difficult, argumentative person, but Donald Coggan wanted to say, you have not met the real St Paul. The real St Paul in the opinion of Donald Coggan is a man with a generosity of spirit, a man of strong friendship and love. A man, who valued more than anything else the deep and strong bond he had with Christ. He was a man inspired by, and committed to Christ. Bishop Coggan sees Paul as a most generous man, generous in his love for his fellow Christians. Generous in his use of his knowledge and energy, to communicate to the world the good news about Jesus Christ.

There is a link between my two different stories. And, that link is generosity: the generosity of the sculpture producing his beautiful carving, and the generosity of Paul the apostle, in his life of Christian service.

But St Paul would be the first to say that his generosity was only in response to the greater generosity of God. He would say that his love and friendship to the early Christian communities was very small compared to the love and friendship that God has for him.

There is in the New Testament a wonderful prayer by Paul to the Christian communities he loved. It is a prayer also for each of us.

Let me share that prayer with you, using the translation by J.B. Phillips. The prayer is from the 3rd chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians.

St Paul wrote, I pray that you, firmly fixed in love yourself, may be able to grasp, with all Christians, how wide, and deep, and long, and high is the love of Christ – and to know yourself, that love, so far beyond comprehension. May you be filled, through all your being, with God himself!

Paul is in rapturous adoration about the extent of God's generous, constant, un-fettered goodness and love to each of us. It is I think one of the great prayers of the bible.

Generosity also is the theme of our reading today from the Letter to the Hebrews.

The writer encourages his hearers to be generous- generous in your love and care to others.

He writes, "Let brotherly love continue. Be hospitable to strangers, care for those in prison."

The writer also reminds his readers about the unchangeable nature of Jesus. He writes: "Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow."

Implicit in that wonderful statement would be the idea that the generosity, and goodness of Christ never changes. Just as Christ Jesus showed God generosity in the past, he is showing that same generosity at the present moment. Let us never forget that Jesus is bearing our sins and failures, now: that Jesus is showing God's love for us, now: that Jesus is generous in wanting us to deepen our relationship with him, now.

Generosity was the theme for this morning.

But let us never forget that generous is the underlining theme of the proclamation of the Christian gospel. We have a gospel to proclaim about a generous, loving, forgiving God, who wants us to know and experience God's love and forgiveness for us.

Let us pray

Lord, give us a generous heart, to act in ways that are caring and supportive of others.

Help us Lord to value the generosity of your love and forgiveness to us, and may we daily celebrate that gift of generosity. Amen

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