

Joash - the building project (2 Chronicles 24:1-14)
Membership matters (Simon Rea)
Sunday Evening 27 April 2008

Last week Sam started by asking why we came to church. This week I'd like to start by asking what we come to church to do. I know that's a really big and broad question so I'd like to make it a bit more specific: What things do we do at church on Sundays? What type of activities are part of our worship services?

[Prayer; Bible; song]

But there's one more thing, isn't there? It happens at every Sunday service - and it's something we do because we're Christians and that's what Christians do: What is it? [Giving]

Christians give. We give time and we give money to the church so that the church can help build God's kingdom. So on one level, what I'm supposed to be talking about today just goes without saying. We're Christians. We give. That's what we do.

In our 2 earlier services, we heard about why we should give and how our giving says about our priorities, our concerns and our attitudes. So in this service we're going to be thinking not so much about why we should give because we all know that as Christians we should give: not out of fear or worry or as some kind of an afterlife insurance policy but as part of our worship and as a response to that wonderful gift we've been given through Jesus.

We're now going to listen to two readings, a familiar one from the NT and a less familiar one from the OT which will help us think about what we give to the church, how we give it and what happens to our gifts and it will do this by focussing on the recipient, the givers and the gifts. Let's listen to them now:

[2 Chron 24: 1-14; 2 Cor 8:1-15]

We're going to be focussing on the OT passage first, so you might want to keep your Bibles open at p456 as we go through it.

The Books of Chronicles are not the most

familiar bits of the Bible, probable because they start with those long lists of who begat whom, so we'll just think quickly about the background to the story. Joash was king of Judah from 835 to 796. It was a time of great upheaval and the Temple, the sign of God's presence with his people which had apparently fallen into disrepair under the preceding three monarchs, especially under Athaliah, a nasty piece of work who had allowed her sons to break in and steal from it (24:7). By the time Joash had grown up, it was obvious that the money intended for the repairs was not reaching Jerusalem (24:6), so Joash set up a special box in the Temple to receive offerings. That system worked much better, and the project was brought to a successful conclusion (see 2 Kings 12:1-16).

But this is so much more than just the story of a successful fund raising project. As I said earlier, this passage will help us think about what we give to the church, how we give it and what happens to our gifts and it will do this by focussing on the recipient, the givers and the gifts.

First of all let's think about the recipient: Where does the money go? Now this may sound like a simple question which has an obvious answer but it actually points to an important spiritual principle.

So where does the money go? v8-9
8 At the king's command, a chest was made and placed outside, at the gate of the temple of the Lord. 9 A proclamation was then issued in Judah and Jerusalem that they should bring to the Lord the tax that Moses the servant of God had required of Israel in the desert.

It goes to the temple. Now as we know the temple was destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans, so what has that got to do with us in 20th century Moreton? What concerns us here is the basic spiritual principle that what was true for the temple is now true for the church. In our NT reading, (2 Cor. 8-9) St Paul appears to have translated the temple tax into a corresponding obligation laid upon his missionary churches to support the headquarters church in Jerusalem, which was going through a period of economic

stringency and he does something similar in other places like (see Rom. 15:25-28, 31). Both Paul and the Chronicler were applying a typological principle. The Chronicler emphasized that the obligation laid down in the Torah to maintain the tabernacle in the old dispensation was still relevant in the new era of the temple. Paul in turn moved from a temple-oriented liability to a corresponding one in the Christian epoch. This typologizing insists that dipping regularly into pocket and purse remains a measure of the believer's spirituality. "God" still "loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Our cheerful giving to the church is as much of a joyful act of worship as was the peoples' giving to the temple at the time of Joash.

V8-9 give 2 more pointers about giving. In fact they are specifically about what has been happening at Christ Church this morning and what is happening now. V8 tells us that there was an opportunity to give. Yes I know we have that opportunity every week but it is important for the church to focus on giving at times and v9 tells us that an invitation was sent, or as the chronicler writes: a proclamation

was issued. Churches need to talk about giving - no matter how embarrassing that may feel for some people. I realise that some churches overdo it. I've been to some churches like that and I've seen how people can be manipulated into giving more than they should by unscrupulous pastors or even by well meaning priests. I acknowledge that this has taken place and that in some places it still does but a church which doesn't proclaim that budgeted, regular, proportional and cheerful giving is a vital part of the Christian life is just not being obedient to God's word.

Let's move on from the recipient to the givers: v10 All the officials and all the people brought their contributions gladly, dropping them into the chest until it was full.

As a learned Rabbi, Paul must have know the story of Joash and I'd be surprised if it wasn't one of the things on his mind when he wrote those words in his letter to the church in Corinth Michael read earlier. As a good Jew he would have known how the people's gifts were used to build up the temple and provide for the

worship there. It's difficult for us to imagine how important that was for the Jews. They believed that the temple was the place of divine encounter on earth, it was where heaven and earth touched in a special way and worship at the temple was probably as close as they could get to heaven on earth. That means that Joash's successful temple project is at once his service for God and his reward from God.

But as a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul knew that God met with his people wherever 2 or 3 of them are gathered together and not just in one special place. Paul's words to those unruly brothers and sisters in Corinth show us that when Christians give to the mission of the church, they are both expressing the grace of God and following the example of Christ. V1 ...we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. What grace is Paul writing about? V2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. That grace is generous, sacrificial and joyful giving. Again in v6 and v7 he writes of giving as an act

of grace. The word he uses in Greek is charism. So when we give to the mission of the church, we are exercising a charism. When we give to the church we are both worshiping God, as the Jews did when they gave to the temple but more than that we are also exercising a spiritual gift. I wonder how many of us realise that's what we're doing as we put our money on the plate or set up our gift-aided standing orders. I don't suppose he had gift-aided standing orders in mind when he wrote but the way Paul writes makes it clear that giving should be regular, too.

So I suppose you could take the stereotype of charismatic Christians and say that giving is something for happy clappers - and I would count myself as one of them, too! But there's more because Paul reminds us that when we give we are doing what Jesus did: v8 Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. Jesus gave his all for us, if anyone claims to follow him, then they'll be giving all they can, too. Now that is a challenge.

We've thought about the recipient and we've thought about the givers, now what about the gifts themselves? Both of our readings show us that the gifts are used and that the results are known. Paul writes of how money is shared between churches, reflecting their unity in Christ and building up the Church. In our reading from Chronicles the same is literally true: the money is used to build up the temple. Notice how wisely it is used, too: v13 The men in charge of the work were diligent, and the repairs progressed under them. They rebuilt the temple of God according to its original design and reinforced it.

First the foundations are built on and then v14 When they had finished, they brought the rest of the money to the king and Jehoiada, and with it were made articles for the Lord's temple: articles for the service and for the burnt offerings, and also dishes and other objects of gold and silver.

The giving had been regular and cheerful and the gifts were used responsibly and carefully. I believe the same is true at

Christ Church. If you look at the insert you've got in your copy of What's On, then you'll see where the money you give to the church goes and I'd just like to say a couple of things about that, now, especially for those who weren't able to make it to the AGM on Wednesday. And there's another reason, too. The gifts given in Joash's day were not only known, they were also shown because they could be seen and felt: v14 As long as Jehoiada lived, burnt offerings were presented continually in the temple of the Lord.

So what happens to your gifts to Christ Church? As you can see, most money goes to the Parish share and ministry expenses. That's more than just paying some of the costs for Graham, Sam and me, it also means paying towards the mission of the diocese and the church of England as a whole.

Your contributions keep Christ Church growing by keeping initiatives like Shine, Suningdale and so on alive. And of course it is so important that we support overseas mission, too - just as the church did in Paul's day.

I suppose the most next largest sum is in

some ways the most obvious: Church expenses, keeping this building in shape and keeping us warm in the winter. I'm sure we're all still aware of how important that is after the heating problems last year. Our new boiler is a real boon but it did cost a lot of money. Even though the church yard is taken for granted, it is still part of the way we show God's love, particularly in conjunction with the Open Church project during the week.

Then we have the parish office and the parish centre: they are both vital to our mission at Christ Church. Having a secretary helps free up clergy time for outreach and pastoral ministry - as well as preparing worship services. Having a building like the parish centre makes it possible to host groups like the mums and tots, craft, needlework, mothers and others, Shine, TLC and so on. All these initiatives are vital in the way we can reach out into the community to show that we really are a WELL church.

That's all such good news, isn't it? There is so much going on at Christ church and of so much is done on a

voluntary basis to keep things going, too, from the flowers to help with the finances, counting the money and taking it to the bank, to regular maintenance and cleaning and working party blitzes. It's great to be part of a church which does all this. I can't think of anything the church is currently doing which isn't building up the body of Christ or reaching out to those in the community who don't yet have a relationship with Jesus.

But there is another side to all this. If you look at the figures at the top of your sheet, where it says 'resourcing our mission', you'll see that we're currently spending around £200 more than we take in each week. I hope you've also seen that we haven't rushed into anything foolishly or started any initiatives unwisely. It has always impressed me to see how much prayer goes into each decision and how carefully the members of the PCC and other committees work look at what we do and how we do it as a church. But we're still running at a yearly deficit of around £200 each week.

What does that mean? Should we start

cutting back on the good work we're currently doing and begin to find ways of shutting things down? Or should we keep on eating away at our reserves until they all run out?

I honestly don't think either of those are realistic alternatives if we want to pursue the mission God has called us to in Moreton. There are so many ways in which we as a church respond to the love God has shown us. I think our readings show us a way through this and I think they show us the same way. What is it? Give. Keep on giving. Keep on giving joyfully. Keep on giving joyfully and sacrificially. Ask yourselves whether you are happy with the amount you currently give or whether God is calling you to give more. If everyone who came on a Sunday gave about £2 more then we'd not need to worry about that running deficit any more - and of course if everyone gave regularly and gift-aided their gifts if they pay tax, then we'd have more to plough back into God's mission here, too. I realise that for some people it may not be possible to do this but...

We all know that our worship doesn't stop

when we leave this building. We all know how important prayer and Bible reading are in our services and in our service for the Lord. Our giving is part of that service, too. Joash's collection box led to a construction boom. Our collections, our gifts may not lead to building with bricks and mortar but that reading from Chronicles challenges us to respond to the proclamation we've heard tonight, to take advantage of the opportunities we have to give, to give cheerfully and sacrificially and to see how God will build his church and his kingdom.

Let's pray.