



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Janet E Tollington on 25th January 2026

Readings: Micah 6:6-8; Acts 2:43-47; Mark 12:13-17, 41-44

Epiphany III

Stewardship: What does the Lord require?

Do you remember the old song 'Money makes the world go around'? We live in a world that has made a god of money and politicians of every colour constantly bring debates round to talk about the economy, by which they mean finances, costs, and whether the nation can afford to do X or Y – and how we are all going to pay for it. We may all want to denounce the divine power of money, of Mammon; but we cannot deny that money has a significant impact on all our lives as individuals and as a church – and it influences all our decisions about ministry and mission when it comes to keeping to a budget.

We cannot ignore money, nor pretend as church that matters of finance can simply be left to others, those with special skills with numbers and accountancy. Money requires our attention much of the time, whether we talk about the pound in our pockets and what it costs when we buy something in the shops or on line; about rising energy bills and higher taxes; about capital assets tied up in property; or the horrendous costs of renting and child care affecting so many of the younger generation; or about pensions savings, or learning to live on a fixed income; or providing for later life when we may need to pay for higher levels of support or care. And that links up with issues of inheritance tax and asset management; and for many others there are the opposite concerns of coping with debt management or living in poverty. Money matters occupy much of our human existence, whether we like it or not.

So with today's theme of stewardship that I've been asked to address by the Elders, let's turn to the title of this sermon, taken from our reading from Micah – 'What does the Lord require?' A nice straightforward question that immediately brings God into our thinking, which is always a good idea.

If we go back to the creation stories in Genesis, we recall that humanity has been set upon the earth to tend it, as a farmer tends the land, to make it fruitful; and to be good stewards so that the resources of the earth might produce bountiful harvests for every generation. So simply as being human God requires us to live responsibly in the way we care for the created world and all the resources that it provides; but as people of faith we probably need to go a stage further than this and recall the words of Psalm 24 that we have just sung and the words with which Augur ended his talk [on 'volunteering'], remembering that the whole earth and everything that it contains belongs to God, that everything we have comes to us as gift from God; that nothing actually belongs to us at all: it is all God's, passed on to us as divine blessing, for us to use wisely in the service of God for the benefit of all. This might make us recall the parable of the talents that Jesus taught, that urges us to use what we have been given to develop our talents and grow our resources – but not for our own personal benefit. Those who had been given talents were required to return them with profit to their master, to give everything back to God, to be used in God's mission of love to the world.

Looking elsewhere in scripture we might go back to the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus the ancient law codes and remind ourselves of the requirement to offer the first fruits of everything we produce to God; in other words to put God to the forefront of our thinking and make giving to God our first priority in all circumstances and not just something to consider as a last thought about the small change we have in our purses, or whatever amount we have left over at the end of the week/month when we have already made lots of other decisions about spending. The law codes also remind us of the requirement to tithe that was laid on God's people. The tithes were required to support the priesthood, for the maintenance of the temple, religious sanctuaries, the whole system of the worship of God. Right from the outset God's people recognised that money/resources were needed to sustain their religious institutions; and it still remains true today in relation to the church. It is costly to run this church so that we can all sit here in the warm with the lights on, so the hub can

operate, so we can pay our administrators and carry out the ministry and mission to which we are committed.

In ancient Israel the requirement was to give 10% of everything you had as your tithe and then to make all your thank offerings to God on top of that. Just think about that requirement for a moment – what would it mean for each of us? Of course the richer someone is, the easier it is to tithe one's income, be it earned, interest received, or property/investment income. A rich person will have much more disposable income and flexibility about how to use all their financial resources than someone who only receives fixed, subsistence level earnings, benefits or pension. The reading we heard about the widow's offering in the temple illustrates this issue – it isn't the amount that is given that is important, it is the generosity, the thankfulness with which it is offered, with a focus on God and God's work, rather than on any self-aggrandisement or display of wealth. Do we really need our name to be associated with any act of generosity if we are in a position of being able to make a large donation?

But the focus on the need to support the church, the basic principle of tithing, remains a priority for Christians; and Jesus taught time and again that the way of discipleship is costly and it calls us to be sacrificial in our response.

The reading from Acts set before us the example of the early Church, of believers who pooled all their resources together and then used them to meet the needs of everyone as they arose – true community living – but let's be realistic about our modern world. Such a model for church is unworkable in terms of our civil laws about taxation, inheritance, the governance of charitable concerns, pension provisions, the way health, education, police, social services are provided for society; and we remember that Jesus taught us that we ought to pay our taxes to the State as good citizens. So the model of Acts perhaps serves best to remind us that the support of church is a collective requirement and that the needs of all its members are also our mutual responsibility. This sits nicely alongside Jesus's parable of the good Samaritan and our requirement to love our neighbour as ourselves – so we cannot simply be inward looking and focus solely on the needs of this church to which we are committed or ourselves as a church family.

Then again, what does it mean to give to church anyway? – the local church? The ones that make up the Mission Partnership? The denomination? At the start of the Week of Prayer for Christian unity we think of ecumenism and how many URC churches are LEPs – Victoria Road, with whom we closely relate, is one such example; and where does Christian Aid and all forms of world mission and development aid and disaster relief need to feature in our understanding of what we give because of our Christian commitment and our understanding of what God requires?

I have no easy answers to offer about our stewardship of money and what the Lord requires – but scripture offers us lots of ideas about the questions we need to consider and how we might respond with sacrificial love and generosity and thanksgiving to God for all the blessings that we have received. A final thought from scripture also reminds us about our bodies, in which the Holy Spirit dwells. So the Spirit is given within us to enable us each to make faithful decisions about these matters; but we also need to be serious about our self-care, the good maintenance of our bodily temples, remembering the command to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. We are each a much beloved child of God whom God wants to bless and to see flourish and to enjoy fulness of life. So holidays and good food and spending on things that give us joy are important aspects of our own well-being; and we are not required to deny ourselves all of these.

One practical thing we might do in response to all these thoughts about stewardship is to think again about what we give to support this church, whose costs are going up just as is happening in our own homes. And any of us who make our gifts through a standing order should ask ourselves when did I last review it, or increase it? It is so easy to let it just tick over at the same level even when our income levels increase.

What does the Lord require? The bottom line is that we should do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God, with thankful, generous hearts as we remember all that God has blessed us with and called us to use wisely in loving service of God's world. Amen.