

Treasure Romans 15:23-29

Tim Anderson 10/3/2019

People often say
that the last part of a person to get converted is their hip pocket.
Conversion is a progressive process.
We come to God knowing that we are broken people
in need of his restoring and transforming love.
But when we come to God,
the parts of us that we realise need transforming
are only the tip of the iceberg.
And as we live out our Christian lives,
gradually we realise
there are more and more things that God wants to change about us.
And often the last thing we realise is our attitude to money.
Is that the case across time and cultures?

No it's not.
This is a very Western thing.
But we are Western people,
and it's easiest for us to be completely unaware
of the blind spots of our culture.

We've looked at time and talents,
today we turn to our treasure.
And this is difficult stuff to preach.
Everybody thinks dealing with their money in a Christian way
is a dutiful sacrifice that we need to make
as the price of being a disciple.
Nobody thinks that dealing with their money in a Christian way
is glorious freedom.
People can see the damage that making sex an idol
does for their relationships.
No one can see the damage that making money an idol does.
But Jesus said in Mt 6:21,
"Where your treasure is,

there your heart will be also."

And if your heart is in the wrong place,
then that will damage you.

Greed is not a victimless crime.

Greed harms those who deprived by the greed of others.

Greed harms the greedy by damaging their hearts.

I said that no one sees this.

It's not quite true.

There are some clear thinkers,
and you find them in unexpected places.

Have a listen to this quote.

"What induces one man to use false weights,
another to set his house on fire
after having insured it for more than its value,
while three quarters of the upper classes indulge in legalised fraud ...
what gives rise to all this?

It is not real want -

for their existence is by no means precarious ...

but they are urged on day and night

by a terrible impatience at seeing their wealth pile up slowly,

and by the equally terrible longing and love for those heaps of gold ...

What was once done "for the love of God"

is now done for the love of money.

That is for the love which at present
affords us the highest feeling of power
and a good conscience."

Who said that?

Can you guess?

Was it a Christian leader trying to urge his flock to reject greed?

No it wasn't.

It was the atheist philosopher Nietzsche,

predicting what would increasingly happen to society

as people gave up on God.

We might not like where he goes with it.
But his perception of where the world is at was accurate.
And that was more than 100 years ago.

One of the world's foremost Christian leaders, Tim Keller,
says that he's had people come to him
to confess that they are guilty of almost every sin.
Almost every sin.

But, he says,
"I cannot recall anyone ever coming to me and saying,
'I spend too much money on myself.
I think my greedy lust for money is harming my family,
my soul and the people around me.'"

Greed hides itself.
It hides itself more effectively than a moth on a log.
And so we ought to operate with the working hypothesis
that this could well be a problem for me.
If there's an incredibly well hidden problem,
and our observation of the culture is that it is utterly pervasive,
then we ought to infer that we are most likely affected.

Well our passage today is from Rom 15.
Often when we are reading or preaching Romans,
we don't get this far.
Our interest is captivated
by the sublime exposition of the Christian gospel in chapters 1-11.
But here in chapter 15,
we actually get a sense of some of Paul's reason for writing the letter.
Right back in chapter 1,
Paul told the Romans,
"I pray that now at last by God's will
the way may be opened for me to come to you."
You see,
Paul had never actually been to the church in Rome.

Why not?

Well Paul was determined to do his work where no one else had worked before.

He went planting churches where the gospel had never been preached.

So he didn't go to Rome,

because there was a church already established there.

But now he's planning to make an exception.

He wants to come and visit Rome.

Why?

Because he's planning a missionary trip to Spain.

Spain is a place where no church had yet been planted.

And Paul wants the Romans to 'assist him on his journey there'.

That's verse 24.

Now you could read this

like he wants the Romans to help him pack his bags or something.

But those words have an established meaning

of giving financial assistance.

He wants the Romans to fund his missionary venture to Spain.

Now that's a pretty forward approach

to a group of people he's never actually met.

But in this letter he's outlined the gospel in great detail

so that they can see that he has what it takes

to present that gospel to the people of Spain.

And he knows that they are committed to the same gospel.

So he's not ashamed to ask for their help in proclaiming it.

What does this tell us?

That it's good for Christians to give to support gospel proclamation.

Not just give so that ministry can be done in your own patch.

But give so that people you have never met and never will meet

can hear the glorious message that has changed your life.

In some ways it's easy to ask people to give to their own church.

Don't get me wrong.

It's not actually easy.

But by comparison it's easy.
When you give to your own church,
you are supporting ministry that you can see and benefit from.
Those who love to hear God's Word proclaimed
will happily give so that they can hear it at their own church.
Those who have a passion
for their children to have good Christian formation
will give so that their church can run good children's programs.
Those who love their own community,
will work hard in their Op Shop to be a blessing to that community.
Those who want the elderly in the community
to have their connection with God maintained
will give so that services can be run down at the Bays.
Just as an aside, I'll tell you beautiful story from there on Thursday.
We were singing trust and obey,
and one of the residents came in a bit late
to the service with her daughter.
She didn't have the book with the words,
but she was singing it out in fine voice.
I went up to chat with her and her daughter after the service.
It turns out that she has dementia
and can't really hold down a conversation.
But the music triggers her memory
and she can remember the words of trust and obey as well as I can.
What a privilege to enable her to express her faith
when she's got beyond expressing anything else much.
In a sense it's an easy sell to support ministry like that.
You may not know or ever meet the lady I'm speaking of.
But you know where you will go
if you need extra care when you are old.
And if that time comes you'd like to have church services.
By the time you get there,
we might be singing 'Shine Jesus Shine' instead of 'Trust and Obey'.
It's relatively easy to give to support ministry
that is a blessing to you and those whom you love.

What's hard is supporting gospel ministry
amongst those whom you don't know and will never meet.
That's what Paul is asking the Roman Christians to do in Spain.

This is what we do as a church through CMS and BCA.
11% of our giving at Holy Trinity goes to 5 different agencies.
And two of those agencies are focused on proclaiming the gospel
to people we will never meet.

The gospel witness that Luke and Jane, our CMS missionaries,
are involved in,

I can't even put on the church notice board.

That's the sensitivity of their location.

You can hear about what they are doing yourself.

You can sign up to receive their emails.

You can come along to an East Asian dinner we will run
when they visit us later in the year.

But we can be sure,

that when we support them,

we are putting our treasure to work for the kingdom of God.

Just like Paul is encouraging the Romans to do for his mission to Spain.

It's great that we can support gospel proclamation
through giving to CMS and BCA.

But I hope one day we are able to do something closer to home.

There are swathes of new Melbourne just to our north.

Botanic Ridge, Clyde, Brompton.

Estates going up left right and centre.

And they have no churches.

One day, Paul Barker our bishop is going to say to us,

I have someone who could do a church plant to your north.

Could you support them financially?

I hope that when that day comes,

we would say yes.

It's not happening yet.

He's having enough trouble finding the people for the existing churches.

But the day will come when we are called on to support gospel proclamation to our north.

But the apostle Paul has another story about finances in these verses. It's the gift that the people of Macedonia and Achaia have made for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem.

What was happening there?

Well there was a famine in Jerusalem.

Famine - that means people starving.

And the those amongst the Jews in Jerusalem who had become Christians were the bottom of the pile.

Their families and support networks disowned them

because they saw them abandoning the faith of their fathers.

Of course they weren't in reality abandoning the faith of their fathers.

Jesus was the Jewish Messiah.

He was the promised King that God had promised their fathers.

The Christians in Jerusalem were following the true fulfilment of the faith of their fathers.

But their families weren't going to accept that.

And so in the midst of a famine,

these impoverished Christians in an impoverished land were cut off from the means of social support.

So Paul organised for some of the new Gentile converts to give them some assistance.

He passed the hat around in some of the new churches that he'd planted, to take a gift to the Christians in Jerusalem.

Now from the point of view of the Gentile Christians,

Paul thought this was only fair.

They had been privileged to share in the spiritual blessings of God's chosen people.

Right throughout the Old Testament times,

they couldn't become one of the children of God,

unless they gave up their culture

and came among the Jews,

and were adopted into the Jewish nation.
But now they could keep their culture,
and share in the spiritual blessings of the Jews,
as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.
It was and is a tremendous privilege.
And certainly one worth responding to
by expressing some love and generosity to God's chosen people.

But from the perspective of Jews,
this was a gift that could help them with their great spiritual problem.
It was hard, very hard
for Jewish Christians to accept the first Gentile believers
as the real thing.
Many of them thought that unless Gentile Christians
adopted all of the cultural trappings of the Jews,
that they were not the real deal as Christians.
The book of Acts and Paul's letter to the Galatians
is full of this struggle.
But if you are starving,
and someone comes to you with a very generous gift,
it's very hard not to accept them as the real deal after that.
Paul has a plan.
It's to use generosity to forge links of unity between churches.
Generosity binds people together.

What does this tell us about our giving?
It tells us that it's good to support poor Christians in our giving.
In the giving from our church,
we do this by giving to ARDF and SparkLit.
Anglican Relief and Development Fund
supports poor Christians in crisis situations.
Christians in Nepal whose houses and churches
have been turned to rubble by an earthquake.
It's wonderful to be able to support these brothers and sisters.
But it's also wonderful to have the bonds of unity between our churches.

The giving develops bonds of unity.
You see these same poor churches
are the ones being used by God
to help the whole Anglican Church worldwide to stay on track.
I saw this so powerfully at Gafcon.
They are impoverished people financially.
But spiritually they are rich.
And they share their spiritual resources with us.
If you want to hear some more,
come with me to listen to Archbishop Ben Kwashi in May.
You should have received an email about it.
If you didn't, I probably don't have your email address.
You should send me an email and ask to be put onto the list.
But these financial poor Christians are spiritually rich,
and they share their spiritual riches with us.
It's right that we should share our financial resources with them.
Even in Melbourne,
poor Christians are spiritually enlivening the Anglican Church.
Congregations of Sudanese Christians and Karen Christians
are strengthening the Anglican Church in our diocese.
It's great that we can share in this ministry to the poor
through ARDF and SparkLit.
And it's great that the bonds of unity
can enable us to share in the spiritual resources of the poor.

Now there are some questions about our treasure
that are not answered by our passage today.
But are worth some brief thoughts.
What about building projects?
Is it right to give to build structures to honour God?
That's obviously a question pertinent to Holy Trinity.
And because they didn't build church buildings
until a couple of hundred years after the NT was written,
it's not a question that any Bible passage is going to answer directly.
I think the question is,

"Is it going to achieve a worthwhile outcome for the Kingdom?"
I would never support building something like St Paul's Cathedral.
Expensive fancy buildings for the sake of looking beautiful,
but with no functional purpose in building the Kingdom of God.
Buildings that chew up the resources of the generations that follow
in maintaining edifices that frankly
become a distraction from what the church should be on about.
But buildings that aid Christian people
in doing the things that we believe that God is calling us to do
in this community,
well I'm very supportive of that.
And I struggle to summon the patience required,
when people who are very happy using a building
that was provided for them free of charge by previous generations
are telling me how building something today
is somehow outrageously profligate with God's resources.
It's just not consistent.
If we won't invest in something for the next generation,
then we should get out of this building
and go and sit under a tree on the foreshore and have church there.

Here's another question.

What about giving to the poor who are not Christians?
Paul is specifically targeting poor Christians with his gift.
But there are plenty of poor who are not Christians.
Ought we to help them?

Well Paul has a specific word on this matter in Gal 6:10.

"Therefore, as we have opportunity,
let us do good to all people,
especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

You help out someone else's kids.

But your own kids have a greater call on your time and energy.

Yes we are to help all the poor.

But poor members of our own family have a greater call on our loyalty.

And our fellow Christian are family.

Even the ones we have never met.

Well in conclusion,
our passage encourages us towards two types of giving.
Support for gospel proclamation
and support for poor Christians.
As a church we do both of those in our giving already.
No doubt there is more we could do
both as individuals and as a church community.
We pray that God opens our eyes
to where we are caught in the sin of greed.
So that we can serve him with joyful hearts.