

Of all the talks this Lent, this is probably one of the hardest because there is a temptation for us to fall into a trap, and that trap is to think of resources as bricks and mortar and money in the bank. As the Episcopal Vicar for Finance and Administration, I deal on a daily basis with these things, and indeed, they are important to an extent, but not to be all and end all of all that we do. We need to think and look carefully at what resourcing means in the context of the Church, and more particularly in the context of the parishes and communities that we belong to. Only then can we see what richness we truly have and how this can be best applied to the Gospel.

Fr Andrew ended last week by saying that the Church, being the Body of Christ, has the function of proclaiming the Gospel, worshipping the God who is its life and serving the community in which it finds itself. This is, as it were a corporate dimension of the Church's activity. I would like to start tonight by breaking this down and asking what it means to be a disciple.

Jesus himself calls us to be a disciple. This begins at our conception and is confirmed by our parents when they bring us to the font for baptism. From that moment, we are consecrated to him and he should become our guiding principle through life. We can choose discipleship or reject it; much depends on the nurture we gain from parents and family and friends; here our schools play an important part, both in terms of education and mission, but above all, we have to make that fundamental choice of having been exposed to the Good News, do we accept it or reject it?

If we choose then we can say some things about our discipleship:

- Discipleship has, at the root of it, that conscious decision to follow Jesus, and in many ways it is done no matter what the cost. Think of the history of the martyrs and the way that they demonstrated their commitment to the Gospel through the shedding of their blood.

- Christian disciples experience constant conversion in the committing of themselves to the Lord. Conversion is real: turning to Christ on a daily basis and then enacting all that he embodied in his life.
- Disciples recognise that God is the source of all things: he is the giver of freedom and through our rational minds, we are free to make choices, fundamental to our living. We make hundreds of choices every day and yet we can do this without thinking: yet when difficult decisions come about it is only then we often turn to God for inspiration. A conscious recognition of God as the source of all and the giver of gifts lies at the heart of true discipleship.

These three points lead me onto the next thing I want to speak about which is the disciple as a steward.

What is a steward? The USCCB Document *Stewardship, a Disciple's Response* says Christian stewards receive God's gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly and in justice with others and then return them to the Lord with increase.

Receive God's gifts gratefully

When we look at the ministry of Jesus and his teaching, we see stewardship as that key thread that runs through the Gospel. It may not be referred to as "stewardship" but the fact that all things come from him and that we are going to be called to an account of our lives in the end, should stir us to think carefully about how we use that which we have. Ultimately we would all like to hear Jesus utter the words joyfully *Well done good and faithful servant* and then an entry into eternal life with him. What prepares us for that moment is the lifetime of rational choices we have here on earth. So we need now to think about our stewardship of our gifts.

In the most famous stewardship parable, in Matthew 25: 14-30 (See also Luke 19: 11-27), three servants are entrusted with great sums of money, and are then assessed by the master when he returns, on the basis of how they made use of the “talents” of the money they had received. The talent was 58.9kg of silver or gold. Now the “talent” has become for us the term for any human skill or gift that we have a responsibility to develop, as did the servants who are praised in the parable. A faithful steward, now as then, needs to make good use of his or her talents. Stewardship calls for creativity and boldness. Each of us has enormous potential. As good stewards, we are meant to use God’s gift fruitfully and creatively, so that with true gratitude for what we have received we may return his gifts to Him with increase. If we truly have the spirit of stewardship we will not let God’s gifts go to waste, and we will not selfishly cling to them, but use them generously to serve others. That is the point of stewardship.

It is significant that immediately after the parable of the talents, we hear of the judgment of the nations (Matthew 25: 31-46), when people are separated, as sheep from the goats, on the basis of how they acted in this life. We can use our time in this life to be selfish, or to be generous to others. The blessed used their time here to care for those in need. That is true stewardship, and we are called to do likewise.

In the encounter with the rich young man, (Mark 10:17-22) he seeks to discover what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to follow the commandments, and then says: *Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.* This is good stewardship: not to cling to material goods, but generously to share with those in need. But the man went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. He was possessed by his possessions, as each of us can be. Jesus tells of a rich fool, captivated by his possessions, who builds bigger barns to store his grain (Luke 12: 13-21) and says: *Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said to him,*

'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. The thought of death is spiritually healthy, as it forces each of us to consider our priorities. What is the point of all the energy I spend on gathering treasure, or spending my time and talent on things that are ultimately useless? It is wisely said that no one at the moment of death wishes to have spent more time at the office. We need to think of the moment of death, but not wait until then to realise what is important in life, and how we can each be wise stewards of what we have received for this earthly journey.

The secret of life is to recognise that we are all in need of God. We do not ultimately own or control the time, talent, or treasure with which we are blessed by God in our lives: the sooner we realise that everything is Gift, the better our lives will become as we enact intrinsic generosity. Life seen through the optic of generosity allows for a real detachment from the things that we possess, so that they do not ultimately possess us. Consumption can be the mark of a life with no generosity – seeking more and more of our own so that we cannot enjoy the gifts that we have been given. What we have – time, talent and treasure – are to be gifts accepted graciously from God and then used in a generous way. This will lead ultimately to a greater sense of freedom in our lives, not simply an existing with “things” surrounding us and a false sense of freedom.

So how do we:

- Recognise the gifts that we have and can share?
- Acknowledge our real dependence on God for everything?
- Begin to cultivate the spirit of generosity that stems from our gratitude for all we have?

...Cultivate them responsibly

Stewardship can be, and often is, understood in a shallow and limited sense, as no more than a code word for “tithing” or for “fundraising for religious purposes.” That is, undeniably, one important but limited dimension of stewardship. If we have a proper spirit of gratitude for all that we have received from God, and are resolved to act as responsible trustees of God's gifts then we will be automatically disposed to contribute financially as members of our Church community, and this might involve tithing, or participating in raising funds.

Even when the Church was young, St. Paul was greatly concerned about organizing a collection (see 1Corinthians 16:1-4; 2Corinthians 8-9; Galatians 2:10; Romans 15:25-28). We do not live in a dream world, and so the work of the Church must be effectively funded. We have to pay the bills, and care for the practical needs of the poor. It is certainly an act of stewardship to set aside a portion, of one's goods to be given not only to the Church itself, but to the broader community. Cardinal Basil Hume used to ask for one hour's pay a week to the work of the Church. Now we live in the minimum wage society, this means that every working person should give £6.08 per week to the church. If that were the case then my offertory collection per week would not be £700 but £2128. When we cling to our money, we sink. When we are generous with it, we are never in want.

That, however, is only one aspect of stewardship, and will take care of itself if the deeper reality is emphasised - a profound inner conversion that leads us to live in a spirit of generosity, which is most fully revealed in the sharing of time and talent. It has been noted that even with generous giving, say of 10%, the key question is not what we do with the 10%, but how we use the other 90%. As we seek to enter into the experience of stewardship, it is essential that we avoid being short-circuited by emphasis upon its most obvious but superficial

dimension, the sharing of material goods. If we start with the idea of stewardship as fund-raising for apostolic purposes, that will absorb our energies and we will go no further, and stewardship will become just moneymaking programme.

We can only be satisfied with a rooted stewardship, which means a profound inner conversion as individuals and as a community in which we become committed to living generously in every way, as the Gospel calls us to do. Deep stewardship begins with gratitude and ends with responsibility. True stewardship means having our priorities straight. As disciples of Jesus we must be clear about what really matters in our life. St Ignatius of Loyola wisely invites those who take his “Spiritual Exercises” to ask themselves who their Master is. That determines everything. Every spiritual tradition in Christianity insists that we do this. Who defines our life?

In religious orders, sisters, brothers, and priests vow to follow the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Most disciples do not commit themselves in so formal a way to living by these counsels, and yet they speak to us all, by emphasising that we are not masters of our own lives, but are to use what we have for the service of others. All three counsels come down basically to poverty - to trusting in the Lord, being at the disposal of others, not claiming our own mastery of the situation. We are only stewards, and are not in control. That awareness is liberating. There are two sure ways of discovering what is really important in my life - of discovering who my Master is. The first is to look at how I spend my money, the second is to examine how I spend my time.

I do not want to talk much about money but the one thing to ask is what do I give for the service of the church? However in terms of time, this is a real question. Our lives are woven out of time, and my stewardship of the scarce resource of time truly reveals what I really consider to be important. Every day has 24 hours, and time once past

will never come again. I must constantly choose how to spend my time, for once this moment is past it is not my time any more. A profound spiritual theme is the Sacrament of the Present Moment: my life is found in each passing moment, and I need simply to offer that moment to God in obedience to his will. “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done.” If I do so, I will never regret the past or fear the future. Such is the stewardship of time. Time, talent, and treasure: these are the gifts that each of us has freely received, and which we need to use responsibly in a spirit of gratitude.

Real stewardship means individual and communal conversion, and calls us to live as disciples of Jesus in a spirit of generosity and total engagement, as we are commissioned to do through our Baptism and Confirmation. In the Chapter entitled *The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church*, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states: *Every person must walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of living faith, which arouses hope and works through charity.* Life is too short for us to waste it as half-hearted disciples. The attitude of joyful engagement which is stewardship for the individual needs to be reflected as well in the way in which we operate as a community.

... share them lovingly and in justice with others

Stewardship is clearly a central theme in the Bible and in our living Christian faith. Stewardship is undeniably fruitful. Where, over time, more and more parishioners become engaged in committing their time, talent, and treasure to the work of the Gospel, the Church flourishes. Parishes report an upsurge in volunteer engagement, a greater fervour in the prayer life of the community, a more effective outreach to those in need, an increase in religious and priestly vocations, and so on. We need humbly to learn from others, especially when it comes to what has proven to be apostolically effective.

Stewardship has to be realistic and this will take time. It requires an engendering in the community of a new culture of generosity and above all outreach.

Stewardship is something that we do now, but has to be embedded in the whole process of parish life. So often we have seen in the past that there have been parish missions, programs of faith development, and they are all good at the time, but then we return to the normal humdrum way of life. A real conversion is needed to embed this generosity of spirit in our parishes so that we break down the parochialism that is pervading our communities.

Real stewardship should also address one of the most important problems in our diocese, parish, community. That problem is that 10% of the people do 90% of the work. Classic examples include people who have been doing the same thing for many years – no one doubts their commitment and generosity, but there is a growth in the community. Perhaps the parish priest is doing too many things outside the parish so the people feel neglected. Everyone has a role to play and we need to look carefully at strategies for the engagement of people in the work of the Gospel in the parish.

One of the terms I learned in the seminary was the German term *gestalt*. A *gestalt* is the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. In our parishes, how much of our activity is disjointed, how much not connected. A constant refrain in communities is Communication. Effective communication between people and groups leads to a more enhanced stewardship since there is no duplication of effort, and each group can learn and develop from each other. Then the parish becomes a community of communities. All of this stems from an embedded gratitude to God for all things given and a corresponding response of people in generosity to the work of the Gospel.

We have to be proactive and outward looking. The resources we have in our parishes are rich and we need to use them effectively. It is easy

to be numbed by the future and the problems of the present, but if we recognise that all is gift, then we need to share everything that we have to promote the Kingdom of God. Fr Quentin spoke about the mission of the church as fundamentally one of outreach, and I agree wholeheartedly with him. The bishop once likened the church to a circle of believers holding hands around the Eucharist but not gazing at the Eucharist but looking out being driven by the Eucharist. The church cannot be separated from the world. What we need to discover afresh is how we make our faith practical and from our worship, serve the world.

Our resources now...

One of the key things that we need to know in our parishes is “what is our treasure?” Our churches are full of people and above all, there are our treasures and as such we need to ask each person “what can you do to further the Gospel here.” Many people do not want to engage – this is a pity because, as Fr Andrew said last week we all have a role to play in the church. So one way forward is to have an approach which I am going to call “Review and Encourage” – review what is done in the parish, who does it, is there a balance between mission within, and mission without. Then identify the gaps and look at what skills you need to fill those gaps. Who might you approach to help – the personal invitation is always better than the round robin letter or bulletin insert.

Once this is done, then look at the needs around you; the church is not an island and needs to engage in the community. Where are your poor? Where are your widows and orphans? Where is the traveller and the stranger? Are our communities open to people like this seeking help from us or are they reluctant to come.

Looking at the treasure in the parish, looking and the need, then begin to marry them. Allocate what resources you can to be proactive in the community so that we are not holy people sat in our comfortable

churches, but we are outward looking being driven by the presence of Christ to minister to the world. As *Lumen Gentium*, the document on the church states:

Finally all Christ's faithful, whatever be the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives—and indeed through all these, will daily increase in holiness, if they receive all things with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father and if they cooperate with the divine will. In this temporal service, they will manifest to all men the love with which God loved the world (§41)

We grow in holiness as we minister to the world, not by how long we sit in the church.

Here are a few challenges that we need to address in the process of discerning a spirituality of stewardship in our parishes:

- We cannot rely on our current parish structure to support the true work of witnessing to the Gospel and the community where we are. If that is the case, we must not cling to our parishes, churches, presbyteries as if they are the focal points around which we work. a spirit of generosity will let these go in favour of an increased sense of mission to the world.
- Developing our communities into effective stewardship groups is key. This has traditionally been the role of the priest, but the priest was ordained to pray, to sanctify the people of God and to teach the faith. We need to utilise the latent leaders in the community – let them take responsibility and flourish! We must move away from the mentality of “helping father out...” to a spirit of real responsibility.
- How do we deploy our priests – they are important as they celebrate the Eucharist which, as we know from the teaching of the church, is the *source and summit of all the church is*. However, do we use the Mass as a driver for mission, or do we see it as a comfort blanket? In the city we have over 50 masses

for a population of about 5000 people: 100 per mass average. Can we rationalise? Can we deploy our priests so that they can be more effective in their key ministry?

- In discerning our mission, in seeing where the key need is to be found, can we move together to understanding our role as responding to that need without parochialism? Do we exist away from the itch? We need to see where we should be rather than hope that the issues will come to us.
- Regarding money – the church is only one place where money is so generously given by our people. So can we use what we have more effectively: is there too much stored up in our barns so that we are not using it for the mission of the Gospel.
- Jesus said that the poor will always be with us. Ministry to the widow, the stranger, the traveller has always been part of the church – are we losing sight of this? From my homily at the weekend, are we living in the light of Christ, or are we creating an artificial light to fool ourselves.

One important thing is the financial support of the mission. In my role as the Episcopal Vicar, I have to try and match our resources to the needs of the Gospel. I do not believe in accumulating money for its own sake: what the church receives from its faithful should be spent in the service of the church. We do need to think about creative ways of supporting the work, but this is always best done in a spirit of collaboration and subsidiarity: not diocesan imposition but local support of local projects. Yes we can advise and help, but the local community is its own best resource for knowing the needs.

What I have tried to do tonight is not talk about the things that come to mind when we think about resources – money, buildings, salaries...but to try and give a different steer by looking at our attitude to what we have, and in recognising this, using and developing what we have both individually and in our communities so that we can apply more effectively the living faith to the world. For

those of you who were looking forward to a blue print of church closure I am sorry to disappoint, but we need to root our mission in the person of the Lord through whom all things come. Then we will be real disciples and real stewards if we recognise and implement our definition of stewardship: *to receive God's gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly and in justice with others and then return them to the Lord with increase.*