

Stewardship Forum

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Stewardship Tools for Leaders : Sermon Library

Title: Think Niagara! - (Part One)

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I was asked to speak about the spiritual basis of thinking about Stewardship; and obviously that theological and spiritual basis is to be found above all in what we believe and what we say about the character of God. Let me begin with a quotation from a very formidable British theologian, John Milbank, who says:

“We as creatures only *are* (only exist) as sharing in God’s for-giving and perpetual Eucharist”.

That’s really my text for this morning. The most important word there is “sharing”. Don’t worry, this is not going to be an exhortation to caring and sharing behaviour in the Church - we can all do that sort of thing standing on our heads. But let’s think a bit more about what it is to *share* in the action of God.

We sometimes talk about Stewardship and Christian giving in terms of God *giving* and our *responding*, which is fine as far as it goes. It’s a very important preliminary stage, but it’s not the whole story. Beyond this model of God giving and us responding is the notion of our very *responding* as *sharing* in the gift - participating, as an older generation of Christian theologians said, in the action of God. It may be that this is a neglected theme in our reflecting about giving and about Stewardship. It’s going to be at the heart of what I say this morning. What does it mean to say “we share in the action of God”, not simply that we *respond* to it, but we *share in it*?

What God gives is God

Perhaps it begins to make slightly better sense if we think of what it is that God in fact gives. What God gives is God. If we say that what God gives is life or being or goodness, then effectively what we are saying is that God gives God. After all, to put it rather crudely, what else has God got to give us?

God does not have a bank account. God does not have a unique collection of God has to give is God, the life that God gives. And that life, which is God, is in itself movement, diffusion, spreading out, self-bestowal. That’s what God is like. So if we receive anything truly from God, what we receive is an energy of sharing, an energy of movement, of diffusion, spreading out. We don’t receive objects from God, we don’t receive lumps of something from God; we receive that life which pushes outwards, which pushes to diffuse itself. To receive is not to have a *possession*, it’s to be caught up in the stream of God’s action.

In a way, to say we ‘receive’ the grace of God is as academic and abstract a way of putting it as to say that some little crevice halfway down Niagara Falls receives some water from the

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waterfall. Receiving isn't quite adequate to the notion of being absolutely saturated and soaked by something that descends and passes on and draws you in.

It's that notion of God's giving that I would really like us to be reflecting on and praying our way into in these two days. Otherwise our theology gets trapped, I think, in a model of God handing over a sort of parcel to us, and us trying to give something back - something else, which is never going to be adequate - and feeling a bit awkward about that.

So much of the history of the Church and the Church's quarrels has had to do with, I would dare to say, people's incapacity to think straight about the gift of God. An awful lot of the Reformation (on both sides) was about that. Catholics, in their crudest representatives, would say what we receive from God is something called grace which comes in neatly and conveniently labelled forms. And we can appropriate these gifts and make them our own and generally expect to have a proper reward from God. Nonsense, said Protestants. God's gift is something called justification. It is hanging a label around your neck saying "OK" and there's absolutely nothing we can do about it; we just say "thank you very much" and get on with things. Somehow neither of those rather crude versions of it seem to be very excited by the notion of a divine life poured into our hearts and our lives, diffusing itself and sharing itself through our own nerve ends. That's what I mean when I say there's a danger of theology getting stuck with an idea of God's gift that is static and trivial.

So, instead of God handing over this parcel, of grace or whatever, we must think ourselves into God giving God; God giving life and that life being itself always a movement, a diffusion.

God gives what God is

Moving on then to a second way into the subject. God gives what God is, his life, and that means that God is completely committed in God's giving.

"He sent no angel to our race, of higher or of lower place"

says the hymn. God does not give something other than himself, something to which he is not committed. God gives what *he is* and so in his giving he is promised, he is committed.

If we're thinking about models for our own giving, we might do worse than reflect on what's involved in saying that God is committed to his gift. The gift is not a substitute for God. It is God, God in motion, God in action.

Inevitably, in thinking further about this we are bound to think about what the Church has for centuries reflected on with delight and bafflement and frustration, and that is the language of God as Holy Trinity, because that says that for God to be God at all is for God to be gift and commitment. Whether or not the world exists, God is still giving. God is still commitment. God the Father gives the life that is in him to the Son, and the life that he gives to the Son, is itself a giving life. He gives it back to the Father and out of that the Holy Spirit is given.

So, as Christians, whatever we say about God somehow ought to be drawing us back into that central mystery: what is it like to be God? An impossible question to answer, except in

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so far as we can say that for God to be God at all is for God to be committed to giving. And even if we were not here, that would still be true of God - a life that gives, that gives itself and returns upon itself and pours itself out afresh, God the Holy Trinity.

And if we begin from there, the life of God as Trinity, the gift of God as the gift of God's own life, we can come by a roundabout route to what I always think is one of the basic principles of sensible thinking about Stewardship: that it is given to us to become givers. Once again think Niagara Falls here! There's not a great deal of point in the rocky crevice halfway down saying, "Well, I think I would like to hold on to some of this water." You really haven't got much option. It falls on you and it bounces off, that's what waterfalls do! It's given to us to be givers, to pass on an intensity of outpouring. And can you perhaps see why that just feels a bit different from talking about an obligation to respond?

Once again, in the waterfall, the little bit of rock halfway down is not under an obligation to respond. It has not very much choice. And maybe when we say that the route of all proper thinking about Stewardship and Christian giving lies in gratitude (which is absolutely right and central), we ought to bear in mind that gratitude itself is something other than a sense of obligation. *Real* gratitude, which is joy and delight, has very little to do with calculating what I now owe. "Oh dear, my wife has given me a birthday present. Now what do I have to do? What am I obliged to do?" It is not quite like that. So the response of gratitude that we make to God, and which we all talk about quite a lot, I suspect, if we are involved in Stewardship, isn't the acknowledgement of being under a debt - it's a share in the dynamism of the gift. Not the acknowledgement of being under obligation, it is *itself* the way in which the dynamism of what is given is present in us. Real gratitude is part of the life of the gift.

There are two ways in to thinking about this. What God gives is God, and what is God is giving. Our response in receiving is therefore always going to be caught up into that life that I called the dynamism of the gift. And Christian existence, it is often said, is to exist within the life of God, the Holy Trinity. Nothing revolutionary about that! It is really at the heart of Christian spirituality from the very beginning. It's the vision of John and Paul, it's the vision which people caught from Jesus, the vision expressed unforgettably in that phrase in the 4th gospel where Jesus promises that his friends will be "with him where he is". Our life is being where he is. Where is Jesus Christ? Well, Jesus Christ is now at the heart of the life of God.

It is something which, as those of you who may have heard me before on this subject will no doubt recognise, a lot of the Eastern Christian world has had a more vivid sense of than the Western - that sense of an abundance of life into which we are caught.

What God gives is always relation

Then, thirdly, another dimension of this unfolds itself from these basic notions. If what God gives is God, and God's life is itself a giving life, then what God gives is always relation - the possibility and/or the reality of relation. Here again I think we have often trivialised or diminished what's involved here. If God gives God and God's life is that whirlwind of giving and giving back and outpouring, which is the life we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then God once again can't give anything without giving relation.

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Think again of so much of our traditional theology in this light and you see how sadly limited we have been - how we talk so often about the gift of God without talking about relation - to God, to God's world, to each other. Think of those centuries where people seemed quite happy to talk about sacraments as God's gift without, it seems, acknowledging they had anything at all to do with how human beings live with each other, with their environment or with their maker. Here are these neatly and conveniently packaged bits of something called grace.

But surely if they are God giving God, then they are God giving relation - the relation of free delight in the other, the relation of exchange, the exhilarating relation which exists in the life of God through Jesus Christ. So when we say that we look at a person, a situation, or a thing as the gift of God; when we say we need to learn to look at our environment in terms of gift, at the created order as the gift of God; when we say we try to see other people, especially obnoxious ones, as in some sense the gifts of God to us, we are talking about learning to see, and respond to, and live with, possibilities of relationship. The life we receive from God, the life of God which we receive, is a gift which changes the way we stand in relation to God and what God makes, what God does. And the all-important change is to get us away from thinking possession.

It's odd, isn't it? You might say that to speak of a gift is to speak of something being given into our ownership. But where God is concerned, a gift is precisely not given into our ownership because it is life, it is action. One thing we really need to be disabused of is, I think, the idea of possessiveness where God is concerned. If we receive this giving life into ourselves, it does transfigure the way in which we see all kinds of things, it does alter our relations. There is now no way in which we can look at another person, if we are serious about talking gift here, as a possession and there is, or should be, no way we can look at our environment as a possession, or a source of possessions. And, finally and honestly, there is no way we can look at our *possessions* in terms of possessions!

What is given us - the world, each other and whatever it is that we have accumulated - if we really see it as from God, it has a restlessness about it, it won't sit still. People sometimes talk about money burning a hole in your pocket - it's the same sort of thing. The gifts of God, if they really are seen as God's gifts, are restless, they burn holes, they don't sit still. To see a person as God's gift is to see them as restless, as growing, as moving - moving into our lives, demanding our involvement with them. To see the environment as God's gift is to see it as a restless sea of life which has its own energy and integrity, not something we can clamp down upon. And our own possessions, our own gifts and resources - material, spiritual, whatever - we can see them as restless, itching to be given. My gifts, my skills sit there restlessly. They wait to be put to work in the giving life of God.

Gifted by God

One of the things I find most instructive theologically and spiritually in my present work is the number of people that come to me to talk about ministry. That's what they are *really* talking about, even though they may say it is about something else; and they are certainly not talking about how to become vicars.

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They are aware of having been given something. It may be because of some life-changing experience, it may be because of study they have undertaken, or because they find themselves fortuitously in a new place. They have moved, they have become redundant, they have had a bereavement, and in a curious but very profound way they have seen this as God's gift. Sometimes with tears and difficulty, they come to see these upheavals as God's gift and they now say, "Well, what can I do to make that experience live in the Church?"

I cannot tell you how many conversations like that I have had in the last four years, and it strikes me that that is the restlessness I mean. Something has been given me here, in my gains and my losses, in my experience of my life, something has been given to me which won't sit still. I can't just say, "right, well that's very interesting, I'll think about that."

There is an urgency about letting the life live *through* you. If you want to know what I say to them, the answer is of course that frequently I am very baffled as to what to say because our Church is so often built upon a completely different set of assumptions from what is contained in all that. But I don't know where to direct them. I can say, "Well have you thought of being a reader?" And somehow that does not seem terribly adequate and, very often, they are lumbered with parish clergy whose idea of giving you something to do is to say, "Well, would you like to organise the Sunday School rota?" That is a gift, but it may not quite be what they are after. They want to kindle something, someone. They want to let the restlessness come through. And somehow that problem about how to respond to and deal with the restlessness of people who feel deeply gifted by God - surely that is somewhere near the heart of all our work in Stewardship?

I think we should listen very seriously and take at depth the sense many people have that their experience, whether it has been of grief, or loss, or of joy and achievement, comes to them as gift in the sense that they feel they are caught up in the action of God. There is a lot of that around. It's not easy, it's not glib, it's not somebody piously saying, "The Lord giveth and Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord." It's people saying, "In this experience, doing a course of study, losing a partner, moving jobs, losing jobs, I simply know that I have been made more myself than ever. That more of myself is God's giving; now what? What are the words for this, what are the acts for this?"

So it is all of that that I mean when I say that thinking of God's gift disabuses us of ideas, of possession, things that we can hold on to, gifts of God coming labelled and sealed.

There then are my three basics:

- (i) God's gift being God,
- (ii) the gift of God being the gift of a giving life,
- (iii) the gift of a giving life being a life in relation.

There, I dare to say, are foundational principles that we are bound to be appealing to, almost whether we know it or not, when we talk about the work of Stewardship. We are talking about that problem that I ended with - finding the words, finding the acts that will channel and make fruitful the restlessness of people aware of being in touch with, and caught up in, the giving life of God.

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Talking theology

I think the task of theology is always the task of re-imagining God and humanity. And while that sounds a very long way off the draughty church hall and arguments about the parish share, in fact there is theology rumbling away under the surface of that, because you are always trying to probe, I think, for what people's sense is of God's gift. And when you are probing for that you are doing theology.

I've often quoted that wonderful bit in one of Molière's plays where somebody is told that they have been talking prose all their life and they are fearfully impressed because they never thought they were clever enough to do anything as complicated as talking prose! I have used that to talk about talking theology - people don't realise they are doing anything as clever as talking theology. But when you are arguing about quota, when you are arguing about stipends and expenses, you are talking theology because you're probing for the sense of God's gift going on. Sometimes you have to probe quite hard, as you know. It's an acid test of faith whether people genuinely have a sense of being gifted. There's a challenge, isn't it? Talking to Christian people, to try and excavate where and at what level the sense of gift lies.

The dynamism of the gift has not somehow really impinged and when it does, given the rather stodgy nature of many people's understanding of this, very bizarre things happen. Polite Anglicans may like to snigger at Toronto blessings but they might also like to turn a rather critical eye on themselves and the thought that these things happen partly because the gifting character of God hits some people very hard indeed and in very bizarre ways. The more bizarre and the harder it hits, the more stodgy and uninspired your notion of God's giving was to start with.

A sense of giftedness

I can remember very, very vividly when I was a curate in a council estate, one of our local servers coming to see me and very inarticulately trying to tell me that he was experiencing the gift of God. (That's what I heard him saying, anyway.) He was saying that when he stood in the sanctuary these days he felt overwhelmed and frightened and that he couldn't stop himself crying, and he was very worried about this because nothing in confirmation classes prepared him for this. But he stood by the altar during the Eucharist, Sunday after Sunday, a man with very little education and a poorly paid job, living in a council estate, and he felt the gifting of God in such a way that it frightened him physically. Well, I would like a few thousand more people like him because that is the level we are digging for, that sense of giftedness. That's why I say it is always a theological task, and that's why I say it's an acid test of the liveliness of faith, how soon you get to people's sense of gifting and giftedness. Because we have to say that a gift received without that transformation and participation is almost always going to be an idol of one sort or another, the gift we take and freeze.

God gives us his life and we put it in the fridge. God gives us his life and we put it in the bottom drawer. God gives us his life and we put it aside for a rainy day. God gives us his life and we treat it as a lump of something that we can hold onto and conserve.

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Have you have read Robert Louis Stevenson's story *The Bottle Imp*? It is a very frightening little story about a magic bottle which grants wishes. The trouble is you have got to get rid of it because it contains a fearful, diabolical power and if you are caught still with it with you at your last moment you're in deep trouble. You have got to get rid of it, you have got to pass it on. What's more you have got to sell it for less than you paid for it. The story chillingly builds up to a situation where it's got about as cheap as it could possibly get and the last person hanging onto it is really very worried....

I won't go into the details of the plot and it's a rather grotesque analogy to evoke, but I think there is something about that in our action with God's gift. It's that if we don't pass it on with that gratuitous extra 'for less that you paid for it' element, we turn it into something quite other than itself and that is frightening and that is dangerous. We turn the giving God, the outpouring, diffusing God into the God we can cope with and handle. Which at the end of the day means we turn him into a God who can't give any more, who can't surprise us, who can't renew us.

So how frequently do we do that, turning God into a God who is actually incapable of giving? The God who is completely committed to his giving in his own life, who is completely committed in his giving to us and gives us the dignity of being givers: all that we lose if we fail to get swept up in that movement, because then we treat God as precisely the God who hands over something to us, transferring ownership from X to Y, and that's not a God who's really of any saving interest whatsoever.

God of surprises

It is what happens when, as we so regularly do, we remake God in our image, when we look to a God from whom our main expectation is that he should endorse what we think; when we create a God who is essentially static and incapable of surprising us. Time and again the history of the Bible, and of the Church, should have taught us that to imagine a God who can't surprise us is a very dangerous, a very lethal business - because when the real God then appears on the scene, life gets very complicated. But we *have* done that, we *have* assumed time and again that God can't surprise us, and it may well be that in our ministry in respect of Stewardship one of the things we ought to be saying (not only to those with whom we minister, but also to ourselves) is that we have to believe in a God who can surprise us.

I've found since my early days in the ordained ministry that the saving moments, the moments that I cling onto as giftings of God, frequently have to do with the experience of being surprised by people - and frequently have to do with my (typically clerical) low expectation of Christian laity.

Again, when I was a curate, I had to steer the parish through an interregnum. Just before the new vicar arrived, the bishop rang me up to say, "You will have to call a special PCC meeting because the man who is coming as the new vicar has just left his wife, and you had better explain that to them." So I did, and waited, bracing myself for the worst. The first comment that came was from a very sober-sided churchwarden, an ex-military man, one of the more conservative, middle-class members of the congregation, who shook his head and said, "I think this man is going to need all the help we can give him." I felt deeply converted by that

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response - surprised and moved and in touch with the giving God, with a giftedness in the man whose first response to what was really quite a disorienting bit of news was generosity.

About the Author. *Revd Dr Rowan Williams is the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. This talk was the second of two presentations at the Stewardship Network Conference in Newquay, 1996. Used with permission.*