

Sermon on Christian Stewardship
University Chapel Sunday Jan. 8, 2017.
At 7:00 a.m.

Topic: Christian Stewardship- Giving/ the Lord Provides

Text: St. Matthew 2: 9-12.

Let us pray: O God, shape me into a servant for the gospel by the gift of your grace.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction:

Thanks to my colleague and friend Canon Garth Minott for the opportunity he has given to me to share in worship with you my adopted church family.

Epiphany: This as you know is the First Sunday after the Epiphany.

Epiphany concludes the Christmas season on the Christian calendar. The word *epiphany* means to “show” or “reveal.” As the magi brought gifts revealing and celebrating Jesus, **the season of Epiphany reminds us of our sacred role in revealing Christ to the world**

The star shone bright, revealing the way for the wise ones.

We also require light to see where we are, where we have been, and where we are headed.

Today as we celebrate the adoration and gifts of the magi to Christ our King, let us prepare to examine ourselves this New Year and consider how we have used and will continue to use the gifts given to us by God.

Hopefully, we shall also see ourselves as gifts that God has given to the Church to build up the body of Christ and the communities in which we live and serve.

We continue from where we left off last year January addressing the topic of Christian Stewardship. So, here we go. Who remembers a definition of Stewardship? (Pause for response) Thank you very much.

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The definition: Christian Stewardship is a comprehensive plan and programme of living which takes into account the management of our time, treasure or money, material possessions and talent.

Peter tells us in his first epistle: “Each one, as a good manager (or steward) of God’s different gifts, must use for the good of others the special gift he (she) has received from God.” **(1 Peter 4: 10).**

Read also 1 Cor. 12 where we are reminded that “the same Spirit gives a different gift to each person.”

The way we manage those gifts is an essential part of the stewardship of our lives and all our affairs in which God is interested and holds us entirely responsible and accountable.

Luke 16: 2 tells us in the parable of the Shrewd Manager/ Steward: that this manager /steward was wasting his master's money, and was reported to his master. The master called him in and said: "What is this I hear about you? Hand in a complete account of your handling of my property, because you cannot be my manager any longer." This must have frightened him to learn that he was to lose his "cushy" job.

Romans 14: 12 tell us: "Every one of us, then, will have to give an account of ourselves to God."

Our Text today is: Matthew 2: 9-12: It tells of: 'The Wise Men, or Visitors from the East, and the gifts they brought to Jesus the new born King. How did they use their wealth? The text reads:

"And so they left (i.e. from Herod's presence), and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the east. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They went into the **house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.**

They held nothing back; they gave of their best, including their worship, which was done joyfully. These foreigners

were delighted that they too were welcomed into God's family.

Jesus, God's gift to the human family:

Before we look at the gifts the Wise men brought for Jesus, let's just reflect on Jesus, God's gift to the human family.

Most, if not all of us know **John 3: 16**. Say it with me: "God so loved the world.... Everlasting life."

Do you remember Christmas Eve's announcement of Jesus' birth by the angels and their singing: "Glory to God in the highest."

Many people in different parts of the world especially Christians tend to attend worship on Christmas Eve, a little less on Christmas Day. As one commentator on Luke chapter 2: 3- 20 tells us: "We come from all walks of life looking for, longing for a sacred moment in time when things have a chance to start fresh- a new center, **a new beginning: a rebirth of faith, hope, and love.**"

At Christmas Eve we linger in the sacred memory of one momentous birth that changed everything. We envision the baby Jesus, newly born, wrapped snugly, and resting in a manger. We remain in awe of the mystery of how this baby was both human and divine, **God's unique gift of the new creation. Christmas Eve invites us to stop our human striving and discover ourselves again as God's blessed creatures.** Wow! Don't you think that's terrific!

We need these times of true stillness and quietness in order to hear the music of life. Music theorists say that the momentary silence between the notes is as important as the notes themselves. Choral directors instruct singers to breathe.

Christmas Eve is like that: the momentary silence between the notes and a time to breathe.

That is why the hymn writer invites us to receive the gift of Christ to us in this manner:

“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given,
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”

Now the rush of the season is over, we can rest in God’s grace and renewal. **We can rest in the trust that in Jesus, God gave us the gift of beginning again. Jesus!** Once a babe, then a man, always the Son of God.

Prime Time for Worship

This unmatched gift from God to the human family then and forever draws out from us the only true response we can give which is; our **Worship.**

Verses 11-12 of Matthew chapter 2 tell that worship brings forth tangible expressions. When the Magi arrived at the house where Jesus was, they fell prostrate in reverence before him. That posture was a visible, outward

expression of the submission of their hearts before the King.

In addition they presented their expensive gifts, probably never realizing anything beyond the fact that gold is a fitting gift for a king. Do they know that the priests used frankincense in Temple worship, thus signifying Jesus' priesthood? And might they have fathomed that priests employed myrrh in anointing oil and for burials?

The wise men follow a mystery to its conclusion, going home by another way. Could they detect that Jesus, the gift that God sent us came to break oppression, to set the captives free, to take away transgression and rule in equity? Yes, to break down the barriers and hate and malice that now bedevil all nations!

The wise men were overjoyed with what they had discovered.

So it should be with us as it was with the wise men.

'When we see heaven meet earth, God's grace breaking through, it is fitting that we are overwhelmed with joy, pay homage to him, and offer our gifts.

Do we not want this amazing grace to enter the hearts of men and women, boys and girls to make us, and break us, and mold us, fill us, and to restore the broken image of the imago Dei that was once in us?

The worship of the magi is instructive for us as well. Our worship, like theirs, is enabled by divine grace. It is to be offered in sincerity of heart, rather than in ostentation or in deceit. It is expressed in humble and sacrificial giving to our matchless Lord.

This requires the giving our all.

I have heard some persons pray like this when they bless the offering: “Lord, we present a small portion of what you have given to us.” (My quote may not be too correct) This causes me to reflect on this verse of Isaac Watt’s hymn:

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.
That’s what is required of us as God’s Stewards

The Magi surely exemplified Christian Stewardship in the giving of their gifts.

The question is asked:

Jesus, God’s gift to us; was he interested in the matter of giving? Of course; not from the point of view of how much was given by anyone, but from the point of view of the spirit in which it was given. (Read when you have time to reflect on your recommitment to giving, Mark 12: 41-44)-

The Widow’s offering. VV 43-44: ‘He called his disciples together and said to them, “I tell you that this

poor widow put more in the offering box than all the others. For the others put in what they had to spare of their riches; but she, poor as she is, put in all she had— she gave all she had to live on.” She gave not in the way people see it, but in the way God sees it.

Giving should be free from grudge or reluctance. (2 Cor. 9:7) without calling attention to the gift.

It should be done freely and without hope of gaining ought: ‘not seeking a reward.’ Giving should be without compulsion, and also systematic. By setting aside a portion as a thank offering.

Our approach to giving this New Year will open up other channels called **‘windows of opportunity’ through which we share God’s love.**

The Challenge set before us the Church in this world of sin.

We have reflected on so far that this all creating, all powerful God of all humankind sent us the gift of His Son to rescue us from sin which separated us from Him/Herself in the person of Jesus Christ.

As the hymn writer expresses this awesome action on God’s part: he writes:

‘He laid his glory by;
He wrapped him in our clay,
Unmarked by human eye,
The latent Godhead lay;

Infant of days he here became,
And bore the mild Immanuel's name.' ie– God with us
forever.

Astrologers, who were not worshippers unconnected to the Jewish religion responded by travelling from afar to pay homage through worship and gifts to the King of all creation.

The widow gave all she had without complaint.

How are we as Church, as good Christian Stewards prepared to give of our time, talents and financial resources to God's mission in 2017?

Let's listen in to St. Paul's word to the Church at Ephesus, and see if it has anything to say to us.

Ephesians 4: 7-13. Verses 11- 13 tell us:

It was he who “gave gifts”; he appointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers. He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service in order to build up the body of Christ. And so we shall all come together to that oneness in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God; we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature.

Surely, there is a gift list in this passage- the gift that Christ gives to his Church. Leaders of the Church are endowed with gifts, not everyone is. Or are they? Looking

at this carefully we will observe that only some people will be prophets and teachers, **the purpose of this is to equip the saints—that is; all of us—and build up the body of Christ.** When it is read like this, we will see that in fact the individuals mentioned are not the gifted but **rather the gifts!** We often think of leaders in terms of the power or authority they have over others, however, this is a misunderstanding of their primary purpose. Instead, the presence of these people among us is a gift from Christ to the whole church, equipping us for ministry, and we should exercise them as such.

In this church context, consider how leaders have used their gifts and the gifts of other leaders to equip and build up the congregation, and offer your selves with your gifts so that you too will be part of this exciting ministry.

Conclusion

After all, who are we? We are God’s servants..

Isaiah 42: 1- 4 speaks to this. Verse 1 states: The Lord says, “Here is my servant, whom I strengthen--- the one I have chosen, with whom I am pleased. I have filled him with my Spirit, and he will bring justice to every nation.

In the context of this verse, the ‘**servant**’ is the **exilic prophet** who rose up to deliver a stirring message to counter the despair of his fellow exiles and sustained them with hope. Don’t we want such servants in God’s world today?

Next, the **‘servant’ is Cyrus the Great** who was God’s anointed and the man whom God will use to set his people free from exile in Babylon.

How many political leaders in God’s world today see themselves as God’s servants?

The **‘servant’ is remnant Israel**, the faithful group of exiles clinging onto their faith in God to redeem and set them free to return home to Judah.

The **‘servant’ is also the church today**, called out from darkness into the wonderful light, and entrusted with a mission to spread the gospel to all in need of deliverance and salvation.

Can insular, divided denominations see themselves as Christ’s servants in God’s world today?

And the **‘servant’ is supremely Jesus the Christ the servant of servants**, who laid aside his heavenly attributes and came in human flesh to live among fallen humanity in order to be the servant of the world.

Yes, to let us know that ‘God through Christ has changed us from enemies into friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also.’ What a privileged task! God still calls ‘servants’ today to respond and give their lives to serve God wherever God sends them into the

world. We are God's hands and feet; God's mouth and eyes.

As Paul says: "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God--- this is your true and proper worship." (Rom. 12: 1)

Instead of being shaped by the world around us, we are to be "transformed by the renewing of [our] mind. (Rom. 12: 2).

Therefore what is the best gift each of us can give to God today? In gratitude, humility and love we can give ourselves completely to God (not the "what- left" of our lives; not the "ashes of our heart") Give to God instead-- heart, mind, and will. It is just what God is longing to receive from each of us. Then, and only then can we become God's co-workers, yes God's partners, God's stewards, yes, God's ambassadors.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, I am yours, I want to offer myself to you--- heart, mind and will.--- in humble service and in thankful worship for all you have done for me.

I invite you to say after me:

Breath of Life, open me to the new things you long to foster through my life as your servant this year. May I make the most of each breath.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

