Rich, yet for our sake became poor

*A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 8:1-15*

If asked to describe the Apostle Paul, most of us, I imagine, would not respond by reaching straightaway for the words ‘international aid worker’ and ‘philanthropist’. ‘Missionary’, yes, ‘theologian’, certainly, ‘controversialist’, perhaps. But scattered throughout the New Testament are references to what scholars have come to call ‘The Collection’, Paul’s project to raise funds for the support of drought-affected Jewish Christians in Palestine.

The Collection had its origins in a famine that swept through much of the Roman world during the reign of the emperor Claudius. And the consequences of the famine seem to have been particularly severe in Palestine, which was, in any case, one of the poorer parts of the Roman Empire. On the eve of his departure for Palestine, Paul wrote to the church in Rome, telling them he had taken up a collection in the churches of Macedonia and Achaia for the benefit of Palestinian Christians. Paul’s two surviving letters to the church in Corinth, which predate the writing of Romans, capture something of the complex administrative challenges which this task necessitated, as well as generating Paul’s most sustained thinking on the topic of generosity. In 1 Corinthians 16 Paul had asked the Corinthians to put aside a certain amount of money every week so that upon his arrival there would be no need for him to engage in further fundraising. Then in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 Paul devotes two entire chapters to the Collection, which is the part of God’s Word which we’ll be reflecting on here at St George’s over the next two Sundays.

At its broadest, Paul is writing these chapters to encourage generosity, and that’s where we’ll focus our time when applying these chapters to ourselves, but it’s important nonetheless to keep in mind that Paul is here urging Christians to be generous, not in supporting missionary work elsewhere, or in supporting church workers in their own congregations, but in alleviating material want overseas, which is something I want to come back to in my sermon next week. He begins the chapter by sharing with the Corinthians his rather humbling experience of fundraising among the hard-pressed congregations in Macedonia. In vv. 10-15 he shares his rationale for redistributing wealth, grounding it in Israel’s experience in the wilderness. And in v. 9, right in the centre of our passage, he directs us to Jesus, who, though he was rich, became poor for our sakes, so that we through his poverty might become rich. And that’s the order in which I’m proposing to look at our passage this morning: we’ll begin by thinking about the usefulness of the example of others in prompting generosity (or any other virtue, really). Then we’ll zoom out to think more broadly about the practice of redistributing wealth and its place in Christian culture. And then we’ll end by thinking about how our love for Jesus can be deepened when we frame his life among us, as Paul does here, in terms of wealth and poverty. Let’s dive in! —

Part One

*Trial by Comparison*

Let’s begin by reading together Paul’s words here, beginning at v. 1:—

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.

Paul begins by sharing with the Corinthians his experience of fundraising for Palestinian Christians among the congregations of Macedonia. It’s an account that emphasises the Macedonians’ eagerness to give, against the backdrop of their own challenging circumstances, all the while drawing to the fore God’s work in provoking such willingness in the first place. The description of the Macedonians’ generosity is disarming because most of us will at some time have been the recipients of generosity that looks a lot like this. Someone who really couldn’t afford to has spent time and money on us without thinking of the cost, simply because it was their joy to express their fellowship with us in this way. You’ve gone into two weeks of quarantine and friends make an extra trip to the shops to shower you with groceries. It’s late at night in a foreign town, and a complete stranger goes to great lengths to make sure you find a place to sleep for the night. You arrive disoriented in a foreign country only to find someone you’ve never met has battled through traffic in an ancient car to pick you up from the airport.

But Paul is also hoping that something of the Macedonians’ generosity will wear off on the Corinthians. The Corinthians set much store by their faith, knowledge, and speaking? Well, let them excel also in their giving! In fact, in sending them Titus ahead of his own arrival Paul is even hoping, as he puts it in v. 8, ‘to test the sincerity of [their] love by comparing it with the eagerness of others.’ When we read this passage out a few weeks ago in our Thursday night Bible study, some of us winced. What was it that made us feel so uncomfortable?

There’s a character in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* who says early on in the novel, ‘Comparison is odious.’ It’s become a line Ant and I like to quote to ourselves whenever we find ourselves comparing something unfavourably to something else. We do it to remind ourselves that so often in life there’s simply no need to rank things in terms of better and worse: they can just be different, and enjoyed on their own terms. And for anyone who’s grown up, for example, in a family where one child was visibly preferred to another, the repercussions of comparison can echo on for years after we’ve left home. Comparison is, all too often, odious!

But, arguing now somewhat against the grain of our culture, I think it’s possible to take an aversion to making comparisons too far. This week in our young adults Bible study I let slip that when Ant and I were at school we were given in our end-of-semester report a rank listing our exact place in the year from first to last in each of our subjects. They looked at us like we’d been born on a different planet. Students today live in a world of standards-based assessment, where you receive detailed feedback on particular skills you’ve been working on, but where you will never know how you are performing relative to the other kids in your class. And it’s not hard to see the benefits of this shift in the philosophy underpinning assessment in schools. But, arguably, a corollary of this shift is a transition from an educational environment that measures excellence to one that measures competence. Now, competence has much to recommend it, of course, but, then again, so too does excellence, and nothing fosters the pursuit of excellence more readily in a classroom or a sports field or auditorium, for that matter, than comparison! It’s hard to improve your times when you run on your own; easy when you run with someone who’s a little faster than you are. It’s hard to improve your sense of rhythm when you rehearse on your own; easy when you’re thrown into an orchestra where everyone else is a more accomplished musician than you are. Comparison drives excellence.

The question is: Is excellence something we ought to strive for in the Christian life? Well, the answer, according to these verses at any rate is—yes: ‘But since you excel in everything,’ writes Paul, ‘in faith, in speech, in knowledge, … see that you also excel in this grace of giving.’ Now, Paul is almost certainly being a little ironic in this passage—the Corinthians’ weakness for spiritual one-upmanship is a recurring theme in the Corinthians correspondence, and Paul is probably having a bit of a dig at their overly-pretentious self-image—but the point still stands: God doesn’t just want us to be competent givers, but to *excel* in the gift of giving, to stick to the particular virtue being stressed in these verses.

The obvious difficulty here, of course, is that giving to the needy, according to Jesus, no less, is meant to be hidden from others. Don’t let your left hand know what your right is doing, he tells his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. And without a doubt the danger to ourselves of publicising our own generosity vastly outweighs the positive impact such publicity may have on helping others to grow in *their* giving. But, then again, that’s not exactly what Paul is doing here, is it? He’s drawing attention, not to his own giving, but to the generosity of people who will be for the most part personally unknown to the Corinthians themselves. So, if we’re to apply Paul’s thinking in these verses to ourselves it will mean seeking out opportunities to share about the humbling generosity of others as we’ve encountered it in the past to help brothers and sisters work on their own generosity to others in the here and now. We need to let each other know about the Macedonians we’ve encountered in past, and paint a picture for each other of what generosity at its best can look like!

So, skipping over v. 9 for the moment, let’s have a look in the second part of this sermon at vv. 10-15:—

Part Two

*‘The goal is equality’*

Verses 10-15 contain three principles really helpful for anyone wanting to excel in the gift of giving, as Paul puts it in v. 7 of this chapter. Let me touch on the first two briefly before saying something a little more substantial about the third.

In the first place, Paul argues, follow through: once you’ve decided on what you want to give, set in place a system that helps you carry out your intentions. Ordinarily, this will entail small amounts of regular giving rather than large one-off gifts. In chapter 16 of 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to set aside at the beginning of every week a sum of money for the Jewish Christians in Palestine. And this maps itself quite neatly onto our modern practice giving through direct debit, although I appreciate that this is much easier to do for those of us who receive a regular wage or a pension, and harder for those of us who, as small business owners, for example, find our weekly income varying wildly from one week to the next.

In the second place, Paul reminds the Corinthians that we’re to be generous out of what we have, as opposed to what we don’t. In other words, God expects the wealthy to give proportionally more than those who are less well-off. Probably the key take-home here for younger members of the congregation will be to try to increase your giving as your income grows with the transition from study to the workplace, and from promotion to promotion. Spending more, for me at any rate, has not been difficult to achieve as my income has increased: giving more has.

Most of what I’ve been saying so far has been focused on givers, as opposed to those who receive, or indeed on the sorts of situations that make giving necessary, which is why I want to spend some time now highlighting where Paul finishes up with this particular section of his argument. ‘The goal,’ he says in v. 14, ‘is equality,’ and then in v. 15 he goes on to cite a verse from Exodus 16, a passage we had read to us earlier on in the service. Let’s tackle the principle first, and the citation second!

Firstly, then, Paul is saying that while giving may be good for you, at the end of the day that’s not why we should do it. We don’t give primarily because we find it personally fulfilling or spiritually helpful in wresting our eyes away from material things and fixing them on things unseen, although giving often will do this for us. No, the main reason we should give is because God is committed to equality, and we should be, too.

And that brings us to the passage Paul cites from the book of Exodus. Let me give you some background! In the Old Testament Israel enters the desert as a rabble, but they leave it a nation. God takes a people cowed by long years of servitude and moulds them into sons and daughters of the Living God. The actual verse Paul cites from Exodus 16 seems at first glance pretty peripheral to the guts of the story, which majors on God’s generous provision for his grumbling people. But at the same time as the wilderness narratives in Exodus and Numbers make for bleak reading, forming a catalogue of persistent grumbling, sexual immorality, idolatry and disobedience, they also contain just the faintest tinge of nostalgia. Israelites living in more settled times could look back on these stories of their ancestors’ wandering in the desert as a time of unparalleled closeness with God. And, given that for much of its history, Israel was riven by class conflict and hostility, part of this nostalgia would have centred on the way in which all Israelites, rich and poor, lived during the wilderness years from day to day solely on the basis of God’s will to keep them alive. ‘The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.’

Having begun by looking at how the generosity of others can provoke an answering generosity in ourselves, and then at how the goal of generosity is equality, I want to finish by turning to the central verse in today’s passage, verse nine.

Part Three

*Rich, yet for our sake became poor*

2 Corinthians is fascinating for the way that, once or twice every chapter, seemingly, Paul generates an insight into Christian life so powerful it practically begs to be memorised. You might like to think of as verse nine as the memory verse for this chapter, and it’s certainly the key verse to keep hold of in both this chapter and the next. ‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus,’ writes Paul, ‘that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.’

Whatever Paul begins by talking about in his correspondence with the Corinthians, you can be sure that it will turn out in the end that he’s actually been speaking all along about the gospel. The gospel is the good news that God has sent his only Son into the world to live and die as our representative and substitute. Jesus lived the kind of life we should have lived, but haven’t, and he died the sort of death we ought to have suffered, but now no longer need to. And God has accepted Jesus’ life and death as what Jesus intended it to be: his way of doing for us what we were no longer capable of doing for ourselves. What makes this verse so special is the way Paul has translated it into terms fitting his immediate theme, that is, wealth, poverty and generosity. Jesus had enjoyed the riches of life lived at God’s right hand in heaven, yet for our sake he became poor, being born as a baby boy to Palestinian peasants living in an occupied land. He lived an itinerant life, wholly dependant on the generosity of others, before dying a slave’s death, stripped of his every last possession. And he did so for us, for people who, spiritually speaking, have nothing to bring before God of worth that they can call their own, people who are spiritually impoverished and morally bankrupt. And he presses into our hands, if we are willing, the gift of eternal life at the Father’s table. He makes paupers his heirs: sons and daughters of God.

Let me finish with two comments. Earlier in this sermon I encouraged you to be generous with your money. Now, some of you will have been generous givers in any number of areas over decades. Others of you will have given generously, but sporadically, and need encouragement to put into practice the kind of disciplined giving that Paul is urging the Corinthians to adopt. Others among us, and I place myself in this last category, are just not there yet. Generous giving, for people like me, is just really hard to practice. We can be intellectually convinced that generosity is for the best, but there’s just something deep within us that causes us to feel discomfort whenever the opportunity comes up to give, whether that’s to mission work, to local ministry, or, as here, to people experiencing material hardship. If you, too, find yourself in this category, then I have two things to say.

The first is this: Jesus came into the world and died, not for people who have their stuff together, but precisely for those who haven’t. Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich. You might be sitting here in your seats in all kinds of discomfort as you think about the kind of spiritual meanness at work in your heart that makes generous giving hard work. But, if this verse is true, you are rich. There might be, there no doubt are, any number of areas in your life that fall way, way short of God’s standards, and yet, without reserve or qualification, if Jesus is your king, then God has brought you into his family and will never cast you out. If you have Jesus, you have everything. All that the Father has is yours.

And the second thing is this: God’s provision for you is a well that will never run dry. He has made you richer than any of us will ever really comprehend. How could he fail to do the long patient work in our hearts that will enable us to challenge our own meanness and turn our eyes to others? He’s given us the riches of Christ, how could he fail to be implanting in us, little by little, year by year, something of Christ’s own generous heart? He’s saved us from wrath, how could he fail to fit us for heaven? Let’s pray:—

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for the generosity we see in others. We thank you for your commitment to equality and pray that that passion of yours would become ours, also. But mostly, Father, we thank you for your Son, whose poverty has made us rich. Father, as your children, we ask you: bring to completion what you have begun in us. You’ve given us Christ’s right to be your sons and daughters: please give us his heart for others, as well.

In his name,

Amen.