

Newsletter for FEBRUARY 2014

Stewardship

In biblical times a steward managed the affairs of a household - he was trusted to look after someone else's property. Jesus told memorable - and in some cases rather baffling - parables about good and bad stewards. Great medieval houses had stewards. Until 1421 England had a Lord High Steward, the principal officer of the state, but it is now a purely ceremonial title. In the world today, a steward is no more than a glorified waiter at a function. Yet the church in recent years has made much of the biblical concept of stewardship. We are all called to be stewards - responsible managers of what is not our own, but gifted by God on trust.

So we are stewards of the **environment** - for God's sake and for the sake of generations to come. Some secular environmentalists blame Christian teaching for the rape of planet earth, pointing to the Genesis stories in which God gives humankind 'dominion' (in fact a bad translation) over creation, as if to set people over against everything else. It's true that some wealthy fundamentalists still take this line, justifying the exploitation of resources on the basis that the world is transient and will soon be swallowed up anyway. But authentic theology is, and has always been, 'green' - think of St Francis. When David Walker, a Franciscan tertiary, was installed as Bishop of Manchester in November, he put on a pair of sandals as part of the liturgy, with the words *David, you are called, after the example of St Francis, to tread gently upon the earth. Be bold to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth, that the world may be fruitful to the end of the age* - a nice summary of the Anglican Communion's Fifth Mark of Mission.

We are stewards of the gift of **time**, charged to use rather than waste it. The line in the hymn *Live this day as if 'twere thy last* is not morbid, but a recognition that since the present moment is all we can inhabit, we should make the most of it. The French spiritual writer Jean Pierre de Caussade spoke of giving ourselves up to the 'sacrament of the present moment': he wrote *The present moment holds infinite riches beyond your wildest dreams, but you will only enjoy them to the extent of your faith and love. The more a soul loves, the more it longs, the more it hopes, the more it finds. The will of God is manifest in each moment, an immense ocean which only the heart fathoms insofar as it overflows with faith, trust and love.*

We are stewards of our God-given **talents and abilities**, so should use them in his service and to benefit others. The man in the parable who simply hid his talent thought he was doing the right thing, keeping it safe for the future (there was no inflation in those days), but was condemned for bad stewardship. It is for this reason that Christians are committed to campaigns for universal education, so that all God's children have the opportunity to develop their talents and, as the baptism service says, grow into their full stature.

It is in the context of all of this that we are stewards of our **money**: *all things come from you, and of your own have we given you* does not just refer to the collection. Some people imagine that 'Christian stewardship' is only about cash on the plate. In the past there were many slick campaigns to get church members to give realistically and regularly. One of my former parishes - a council estate in south Manchester - was an early pioneer of such campaigns. On one occasion in the 1960s it took five full double decker buses to Urmston Baths (covered over!) for a dinner with speakers presenting the challenge, after which everyone was invited to make a pledge, with follow-up home visits by a large team. This method - for some years - but failed to set stewardship in its wider context, of the need to respond to God's generosity (the phrase that is so often on the Bishop of London's lips) not only by having weekly envelopes, but by reviewing our total commitment.

Of course, we do not only exercise financial stewardship by giving to our church; we give to many other causes too, just as we give our time and talents to them. But regular and responsive giving to

maintain the life of our parish church remains important. Here at St George-in-the-East, some imagine we do not need funds because we have significant rental income from the crypt and church flats. But we also have a large, complex Grade I listed building to maintain: not just the Hawksmoor shell with some crumbling stonework, but the 1960s rebuilding, some parts of which, like the main copper roof, many flat asphalt roofs, and the electrics, are reaching the end of their lives. Not to mention disabled access, for which proposals are going ahead, at the likely cost in excess of £1¼m.

Led by Richard Powell, our treasurer (who has served us so well for a number of years, but has now moved south of the river - tributes in due course!) our PCC has sought to exercise a responsible stewardship of our building by careful budgeting, to provide for these needs. The ideal is that our rental income should fund this, and that the mission and ministry of the church - our activities - should be supported by congregational giving. But we fall far short of this ideal. Only a proportion of this year's £60,000 common fund payment to the diocese (the mechanism for providing the Rector's stipend and all other local and diocesan ministry costs) comes from the 'living church'; and we remain a 'supported parish' because the cost of maintaining a full-time priest in a parish is set this year at £75,000. (The Rector hastens to add that his stipend is less than a third of this...)

We shall not be running a 'stewardship campaign', but we are asking everyone who regards St George-in-the-East as 'their' church to review their giving. 'Tithing' - giving a tenth of your income - is the biblical standard, but the Church of England, recognising that nowadays we give to a variety of other causes, has set the target at 5%. We live in straitened times, and such a figure may not be possible for those on low and fixed incomes, though these are often among the church's most generous givers, in line with the parable of the widow's mite, where it was not the amount given but the proportion of her wealth, plus the unobtrusive way it was contributed, that mattered. Your giving can be unobtrusive too: we guarantee **confidentiality** in recording envelope and standing order contributions, in line with our policy on financial procedures. And a final bit of our parochial stewardship is to maximise the 25% gift aid provisions on offer. Have a look at <http://www.stgite.org.uk/giving.html> and consider your Christian stewardship!

Parish news

Not much space this month for our usual review of past and forthcoming events, but a few snippets of news:

- Having two grand **pianos** in church may seem excessive, but they seem to have been breeding - there is currently a third, a Steinway concert grand. This is because we have offered its owner a temporary home pending arrangements for craning it into his flat. He will be giving a short recital for friends on the afternoon of Sunday 2 February before it leaves for its new home.
- The **peregrine falcons** are back and preparing for breeding.
- **Paul Chance**, who like his father Percy (Richard) was a server and acolyte here at the time of the rebuilding, has recently been in touch and sends good wishes to all who remember the family. His mother Rene - who made some of our altar linen - is now in a care home.
- **Ken Leech**, now living at Sandon House in Mossley, has recently circulated a 'general update', listing in characteristic and lively detail his current activities, and sending his love and good wishes to all who remember him.