

## Sermon - Stewardship Program: giving thanks

### Stewardship Program: introduction

- Today we are starting a Stewardship Program, that will run for the rest of the Easter season.
- There are a number of things to say, by way of introducing us to the program, and each is important.
- The first thing to note is that this is not a Stewardship Campaign - at least, not in one of the ways it might have been undertaken in the past.
- One kind of Stewardship Campaign was to specifically target planned giving, and a campaign was deemed successful when the regular giving increased to the desired target.
- This is not such a campaign, but rather a program to look at where we are, what we have been blessed with, and what the current needs and opportunities might be.
- Of course, if it so happens that you *are* able to increase your regular giving then that would be wonderful - but that is not the primary purpose of this program.
- Why is it even called a 'program'?
- Simply because we are going to progress systematically through the various aspects of our parish life over the next few weeks, and then conclude with a good celebration together - hopefully with a shared meal - although the practical details of doing that under the covid regulations still need to be worked out.

### The Easter season: celebrating new life

- Why are we doing this now, straight after Easter Day, instead of the more traditional time, that is, in the lead-up to the annual meeting, and the setting of the budget for the next financial year, starting on 1st October?
- For two simple reasons: we were wanting to do this last September/October, and the lockdown has postponed it.
- And in the Easter season we are reminded both of the resurrection - in which we are invited to participate in together as a community - and of the formative years of the early church.
- In some ways the parish St John the Divine is old, in that last year was the centenary of the parish of Croydon as an independent parish in its own right, when Rev'd Athery John Whyte was appointed as the first Vicar on 1 July 1920.
- And in other ways the parish feels like an almost new one, as people have been gradually emerging from the long covid lockdown, and new rosters and ways of functioning are being established, or re-established.
- And so during the rest of the Easter season, while we have Gospel passages of Jesus explaining himself to the disciples, and passages from Acts describing events in the earliest church community, we will be complementing these with descriptions of the blessings of the past and present here at St John's, and look at what God is calling us to be and to do - now and going forwards.

### A Eucharistic community

- Of course we must pay attention to our current needs - that is, where we appear to be under-resourced or areas where our material and administrative infrastructure needs addressing.
- But it is even more important that we pay attention to what we are already blessed with, and give thanks for that.
- And following on from that, I want to highlight - not only for this stewardship program, but going on well beyond this year - what I sincerely believe is fundamentally true of us as a faith community.
- In my report for last November's annual meeting, I described St John's as a Eucharistic community.
- This was a simple but essential description of who we are and how we embody our faith.
- Ever since I arrived here nearly three years ago, I've been pondering how best to describe ourselves.
- A simple fall-back description is that we are Anglo-Catholic.

## Sermon - Stewardship Program: giving thanks

- Over many years I have often found this label to be inconvenient, because many people have all kinds of assumptions about what this means for them, and then often find that their expectations aren't met, or they are turned off not by how we actually worship, but by how they assume we worship.
- I thought of describing us as traditional - but again, that can come across as being too conservative and not open to change and growth.
- And then as we progressed through the covid lockdown, I realised that 'Eucharistic community' is possibly the best descriptor.
- The eucharist is a sacrament that is at the heart of our worship and our communal faith.
- Indeed, gathering regularly for the eucharist is an essential communal activity that we do - together.
- We make our communion not only with the Divine, but we intentionally gather together to do so.
- Communion is a celebration of the Real Presence of our risen Lord among us.

### Giving thanks

- And the word 'Eucharist' is an ecclesiastical Greek word meaning 'thanksgiving'.
- This is specifically to give thanks for what God has accomplished for us through his Son, in overcoming and breaking through the deadening effect of sin, and enabling us to enter into a life-giving relationship with our heavenly Father.
- And we give thanks in our participation, together, in sharing in the consecrated bread and wine, that is, the body and blood of Christ.
- Nevertheless, while we can call ourselves a Eucharistic community because of our shared participation in this sacrament, we can also call ourselves Eucharistic because we are able to give thanks more broadly still.
- We give thanks for the previous generations of parishioners and clergy here, who have passed so many blessings on to us.
- These are not just material blessings in the form of property, finance and furnishings and so on - for which we indeed give thanks - but also the community blessings - that is, every manifestation of God's heavenly kingdom by our church.
- Every time St John's has been a blessing to the wider community, this has blessed us in return - and for that we also give thanks.

### Aspiring to Eucharistic action

- The descriptor 'Eucharistic community' is also an aspirational one - something that we can aspire to be.
- In this I am thinking of the Eucharistic *actions* of Jesus, which he enacts in a variety of Gospel stories, when he takes, blesses, breaks, and shares.
- Jesus takes whatever is offered - whether it's the bread for the meal, or five loaves and two fish, or anything else.
- And he blesses it - he asks God to sanctify it for God's life-nurturing purposes.
- And then Jesus breaks it - that is, he enables what is offered to undergo sacrificial transformation so that its benefit can be effected.
- And finally Jesus shares it, sharing the benefit of it.
- So when I describe us as a Eucharistic community, in addition to participating in the sacrament and more generally giving thanks, we can also aspire to be a community that offers itself to Jesus, for blessing, for sacrificial transformation, and then for sharing.

### Reflecting on common custodianship

- I haven't specifically referred to today's Scripture readings.

## Sermon - Stewardship Program: giving thanks

- Instead, I would like to reflect briefly on last Sunday's reading from Acts, because I think it really speaks to our Stewardship Program.
- Here is the passage:

*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4.32-37)*
- Now for a variety of good reasons I am not suggesting that we try to replicate this 'holding everything in common' as a communistic ideal.
- However, I do suggest that we are already doing that in the form of our church community.
- Over the generations people have contributed materially - and are still contributing - to, and through, St John's church - and what they have given has been offered to the glory of God, and for the use of this church.
- Every thing that we have here is held in common by us, for us to use.
- People give food, and we pass it on to those in need.
- People give money, and we use it to pay bills and maintain our property - not just for us to use, but so that others can benefit too.
- People give things - like the carpet down the central aisle, for example - which helps to beautify the floor and make our footsteps more reverential.
- Don't get distracted by any debates over legal ownership, but instead focus on our custodianship: each generation of parishioners are the custodians together of what previous generations have given.
- And each generation is responsible for exercising stewardship over what we hold in common, to grow God's kingdom and to pass on to the next generation of parishioners.

### Reflecting on Barnabas

- This Scripture also introduces us to a well known character in the book of Acts - Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, nicknamed 'Son of Encouragement', that is Bar-nabas.
- And there is a hint of the Eucharistic actions in what Barnabas does, in that he takes his field, he enables it to be transformed in that he sells it for money, and then he shares it with the church community.
- And so as we proceed with our Stewardship Program over the next few weeks, I invite you to likewise be encouraged by the example of Barnabas.
- I invite you to look at ourselves with new eyes, and see where God is blessing us, and where we are blessing others - or where we have new opportunities to bless others.
- Then I invite you to review where and how you are contributing to the life of St John's, in terms of time, talent, and treasure.
- And finally I invite you to ask God for discernment and guidance on how you might respond to our current needs and opportunities, as members of our eucharistic community of St John the Divine in Croydon Victoria.
- And to give thanks - to give thanks.