

'Remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' Acts 20.35.

'It is more blessed to give than to receive'. Doesn't that saying get to the very heart of what Christianity is all about? Isn't the essence of Christianity *giving*? What is it that we are proclaiming from the pulpits Sunday after Sunday? That God is a *generous* God; that he is the One who *gives* life. He *gives* us our daily bread. And what is the most famous verse in the Bible? *John* 3.16: 'for God so loved the world that he *gave* his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.'

Sometimes I try to imagine what it would be like to be in the company of Jesus. I try to put myself in the position of one of those first disciples, spending yet another day on the road with the Master. If I were, say, Matthew the tax-collector, or Peter the fisherman, would I feel that Jesus was always *taking* from me, always demanding, always expecting higher and higher moral effort? No, he would have made me feel as if I were worth a million dollars already. When everyone else saw only the greed and the selfishness in Zacchaeus the little tax-collector, Jesus saw the good, and loved him.

Jesus was always giving, and he expects us to be giving. When strangers come into church, perhaps because they're curious, or seeking, or they've got some personal problem, they should feel that they are entering into a completely different place from the outside world. Out there, people won't give you the time of day, will they? Some people wouldn't even give 10p to Christian Aid. Why should we? We've got our own bills to

pay. At your work, if you make a mistake, there's no forgiveness, because that other person who wants the promotion sees his chance. It all comes out on the road, doesn't it? There are still some courteous drivers, but generally, few will give you a chance at all. I watch the expression on people's faces when you get in their way and knock a nano-second off their life. The rage is not ordinary! You would have thought you had just murdered their whole family, burned their house down, and stolen all their money.

It's a tough, ungenerous world out there. It should be different when people enter here. People should see *Jesus* in us. They should see that the heart is generous here, the hand opened wide, not the clenched fist. This is where we give people another chance, where we have time for people, where we care about them. Unfortunately that is not always the reality, is it? 'It's the credit crunch. I won't be able to give so much money to Commitment for Life. I'll have to cut back on what I put on the church plate'. Now, all that makes sense. The problem is that that is how the *world* outside thinks. *The* big complaint I hear about the clergy is that they don't visit their parishioners. Oh, they're busy all right, but busy sitting on important committees, but can't be bothered with Mrs Jones and her bunions. We all need encouragement, especially in the world where so many are just ready to criticise you or put you down. Some people in our churches would rather swallow cyanide than give a little word of encouragement or appreciation. Are we Christians, then, no different from the outside world? Is that why we make so little impact on the

world? Jesus gives us this counter-intuitive teaching: 'it is more blessed to give than to receive'. CS Lewis said that we should give, and give until it hurts. Suppose Jesus had said, 'I don't think I'll bother sacrificing my life on the Cross. Not too many people have asked for it. And they don't seem very bothered or grateful. No! I'll forget it.' Jesus teaches us to be extravagantly generous, because God himself is generous.

'It is more blessed to give than to receive'. This is what sets the Christian apart - or jolly well *should* do! And I'm not just talking about giving *money*. I'm talking about giving up your *time*. I'm talking about giving others a chance; giving them a break. If we really lived like this, and put it into practice, the churches would be bursting. People don't want meanness and hardness. They want generosity and love and mercy. If they don't find it in church, where will they find it?

There's no good just *thinking* about what a good job the flower-ladies did today. Get up and tell them. Too shy to say something nice? Love makes the effort. 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'. We might think it is more blessed to win the lottery, but actually you do feel a warm glow when you do something nice for another person, don't you? That's the feeling of being blessed. And the Bible word 'blessed' means 'approved', 'approved by God'. To give is a Christlike thing.

But there's another side to this. Yes, it is *more* blessed to give than to receive, but it doesn't mean that it is *not* blessed to receive. Jesus didn't contrast giving and *taking*, but giving and *receiving*. Sometimes it is quite a nice thing to be giving. It puts you in a position of *power*. You're Lady

Bountiful handing out goodies, and others are grateful to you. That's a nice feeling of superiority, isn't it?

I am always astonished at how badly people take *compliments*. When I was a child I once asked my mother, 'What do I say when someone says something nice about me?' She answered, 'Just say thank-you'. But so often when I compliment someone, say, on their nice cardigan all I get back is, 'What? That old thing?' We're not as good at receiving as we like to think, are we? Do you know what the worst thing for a Yorkshireman is? (I don't mean, when it comes his turn to pay his round!) No, it's being beholden. Never be beholden.

I'll easily lend you money, but I won't take it from you. I'll give you a lift, but I'd rather walk myself. And you know, deep down it's old-fashioned pride. I don't want to be beholden to anyone. Giving puts me on top; receiving makes me feel dependent. I believe in self-help, but there comes a time when we have to be humble enough to ask for help.

Yes, it is more blessed to give than to receive, but it takes a humble and gracious spirit to receive. So many people, even in our churches, just can't get this grace thing. Yes, there's a heaven, but I've got to be good enough for it. OK, you're standing at the pearly gates, and St Peter asks you, 'Why should I let you in here?' What do you say? If your answer began with 'Because I ...', then you haven't understood the gospel. If you answered, 'Because God/Jesus...', then you've got it. God's love, heaven, forgiveness, are his gift to you freely offered through Jesus his Son. All you have to do is reach out and graciously receive it. Nothing more. That's it!