

Lent course 2022

Session 4: Responding to God with generosity.



Grace, Gifts... and Generosity

Hello! And welcome to our 4th and final session for Lent 2022.

Over the last 3 sessions we have thought about God's grace to us: the fact of God's unconditional love and blessing, – grace that we can never deserve or earn – given to us simply because God has an overwhelming love for each of us.

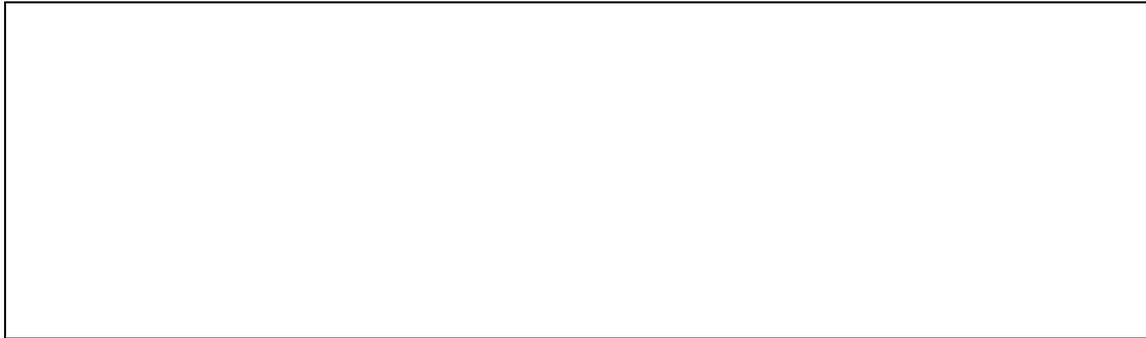
We have thought about the love gifts that God gives us – gifts and fruits of the Spirit – some for all of us, some specially for each of us, and last session we did some looking at ourselves, I hope honestly!, to discover or remind ourselves about those “specially for us” gifts.

So we come to the final element in our meander through Grace, Gifts and Generosity, thinking about God's generosity – our experience of this in our own lives and the examples scripture gives us. And as Lent is the traditional season of self-examination and repentance, we will end by reflecting on our response to God's generosity and asking God for a renewed spirit within us, to use our gifts with generous hearts.

Let's start - with a retrospective think!

Understanding God's generosity in terms of *anything God does or gives that is unexpected and /or over and above is what is needed or expected ...*

...If you were asked to give an example of God's generosity to you/ in your life, what would you say?



Think about that occasion/ that event ...

... were you expecting God to act?

... were you expecting God to act in the way God did?

... did God act through anyone else?

... were you aware of this being an example of God's generosity *at the time*?

...what effect did this have on you? and / or anyone else? (At the time or later)

If you really can't think of an occasion for you, do you know of an example of God's generosity for someone else?

Take some time to think about this.

After last Sunday I have a very personal and up to date example of God's gift of generosity shown in the generous actions of St Thomas people, but let me tell you briefly about the first time I began to think about God being generous.

Many years ago, our goddaughter lived with her family in a very remote part of Nepal, one day's stiff walking from the nearest airstrip. The day before her 8th birthday, in what had been a very tough year, her mum asked her what sort of birthday cake she would like – and was told “a strawberry cake”...

No garden, no shops, no strawberries equalled one upset mother.

But what did they wake up to on the birthday morning? The hillsides suddenly awash with wild strawberries...and no doubt on the family's part that this was God at work.

So we have times when God's generosity involves other people and times when God blesses us directly.

We'll come back to this matter of what part we play in God's generosity to us and to others later in the session but I hope you have been able to identify at least one occasion or event that has stuck with you.

And if you thought hard, I wonder if you have been surprised by how many examples of God's generosity to you?

If you have been I think there are a number of reasons why!

- We don't feel we deserve generosity - Correct! We don't! But that doesn't stop God being generous to us
- We find human explanations for God's direct actions and don't credit God for prompting the actions of other people!

- We don't keep at the front of our minds the fact that God is intimately concerned with every moment of our days, so we not infrequently *miss* God's acts of generosity towards us, that I think occur far, far more than we recognise because we are not expecting this!

Yet we shouldn't be surprised! The theme of God's generosity runs all the way through scripture with example after example of God's actions on behalf of, or towards God's people - described with words like "abounding, lavish, rich, great, plentiful, abundant (there's lots of abundance!), bountiful, overflowing" and so on ... You get the idea!

Here is an example, from Psalm 65:

You visit the earth and water it,
 you greatly enrich it;
 the river of God is full of water;
 you provide the people with grain,
 for so you have prepared it.
 10 You water its furrows abundantly,
 settling its ridges,
 softening it with showers,
 and blessing its growth.
 11 You crown the year with your bounty;
 your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
 12 The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
 the hills gird themselves with joy
 You visit the earth and cause it to overflow...

There are many such passages but this session let's spend a little time on a couple of examples, beginning with an extract from Exodus chapters 15 & 16.

God has enabled the Israelites to flee from captivity in Egypt, so let's join them just after they have crossed the Red Sea. **Read on...**

Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23 When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. 24 And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" 25 He cried out to the LORD; and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

They travelled on but the lack of food sparked complaints...

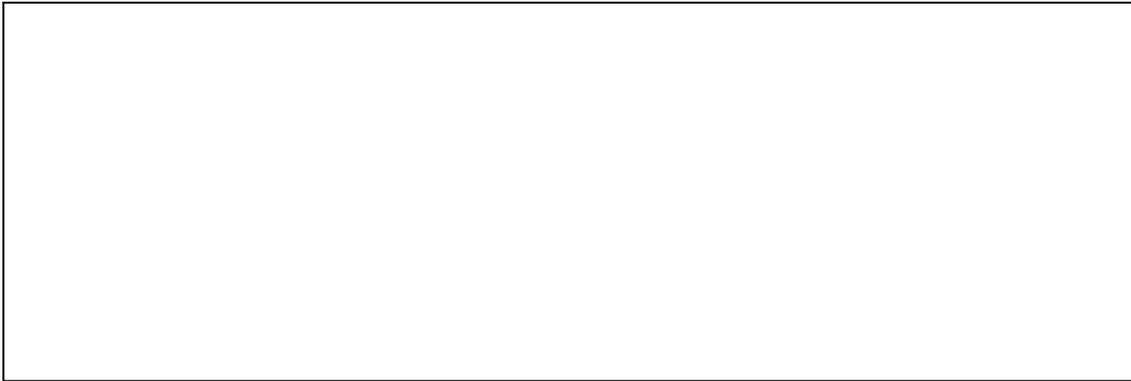
The Israelites said to Moses and Aaron, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.

Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, 7 and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD.

13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat...”

Exodus tells the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert before they enter the Canaan, the land God gave them. And within this narrative, chapters 15 & 16 give a fascinating account of God testing the Israelites – first at Marah, then with the resulting quail and manna (a story told in a different version in Numbers 11). This whole episode carries the message that the Israelites were not to test God ... but what do the verses above tell us about God’s generosity?

Take a moment to think about this.



We could argue that the Israelites had reason to complain, but nonetheless they come across pretty consistently as a moaning bunch of people. Yet God is generous to them, despite their complaints and I think we can see here that

- God knows the needs of God’s people,
- God is to be trusted
- God provided
- God works generously through the supernatural and human world.

By divine, supernatural action (I don’t think we can really explain away bitter water becoming instantly sweet as a result of a piece of wood being thrown in!)

By using the natural world (**quails** migrate from Sudan/ Ethiopia in spring and arrive in Palestine exhausted, so are easy to catch, while **manna** is a sort of glucose/ fructose resin that comes from the tamarisk tree – I think it

has something to do with secretions from an insect – but instead of dwelling on that! ...

Look briefly at much the same message from the New Testament - another very well-known passage, this time from Matthew's gospel

Read Matthew 6: 25 - 33.

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

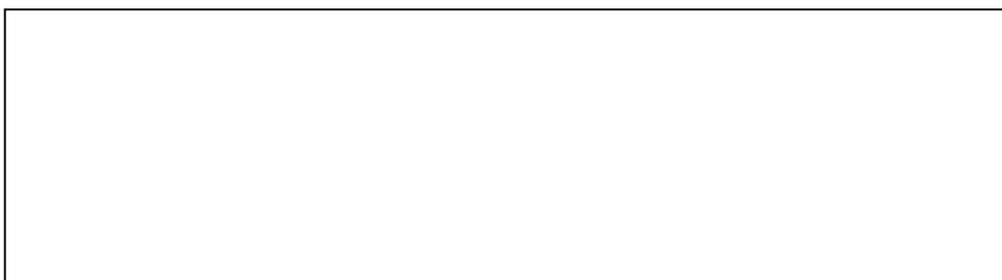
This famous passage – an extract from this section of Matthew's gospel, known as the 'Sermon on the Mount', that in most versions is headed "Do not worry".

(As a slight aside, there has been some interesting relatively recent scholarship about the translation that has given us the sense of worry as what we fret about, when possibly we should understand the message here as "don't strive for" or "don't put your energy into" rather than don't fret or worry...

But we won't worry about that aspect this session !)

As with what we read from Exodus, we have to acknowledge that the thrust of this passage - and the Sermon on the Mount as a whole - is how God wants us to live as people who belong to the kingdom of God, but nonetheless -

What does Jesus tell us here about the scope of God's generosity..?



We have here a development of the message that Exodus gave us – God’s generosity embraces the necessities of life : food, drink, clothing. God’s generosity is supremely practical.

I think we do need to note that while the other gospels were written for predominantly Gentiles, Gentile converts to Christianity, Matthew was written for the Jewish-Christian community : and he presupposes a level of prosperity that perhaps was not the reality for every ethnicity in his world at the time... Or for everyone in Brampton today... This brings us to the matter of our involvement in God’s generosity.

But first, a couple of verses to **read from Luke 6**.

³⁷Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’

So what do **these** verses tell us about the generosity of God?



I think we are moving on from the practicalities of food and drink here. The generosity of God is not confined to the practical things of life! It is also given in relation to our actions.

These – rather uncomfortable – verses refer to our actions in the here and now ... and how our actions will have an impact on our destiny : Luke seems to be saying that God will be generous in relation to our judgement, condemnation and forgiveness ... *but we have a part to play in enabling how generous God is to us!*

What is your response to that?



I wondered if St Paul came to mind as you were thinking?

We might imagine a very interesting late night conversation between Luke with his Greek background and Paul coming at it with a Jewish mentality – hammering out the matter of God’s generosity to us in relation to salvation.

For Paul, it is all about God and not about us: salvation is gift – unearned and undeserved! Paul’s line is that we deserve condemnation but God’s generosity overcomes any lack of generosity on our part ... whereas here Luke seems to suggest that our actions towards others will determine God’s action towards us. But for Paul – as for Luke (and James!) faith that saves us will, of course, be shown in our actions. So although they are coming at this from different viewpoints, with Luke here flagging up the significance of our human actions, I don’t think there is conflict between them...

You might like to **pause here** and ask yourself where you stand in relation to Luke and Paul. Closer to Luke? Or next to Paul? How significant to you is the way you live in relation to others?



Now let’s move on to the last part of this session: thinking about our response to God’s generosity and the matter of our part in God’s generosity.

For a start, our being generous clearly matters to God!

Way back in the ancient times of the Old Testament, the response of the Israelites, as they wandered round in the desert, mattered to God. They had been the recipients of God’s generosity in getting them out of Egypt, now in their turn they were to be generous to others – Leviticus 25 tells us they were to lend with interest free loans.

And the New Testament tells us repeatedly how we should live – and that this matters to God.

We thought quite a bit about chapter 12 of Paul’s letter to the Romans in our first and second sessions, so now let’s catch up with him at a different point in his life, at the Mediterranean port of Miletus.

Paul is coming to the end of his 3rd and last missionary journey. He’s keen to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost but he has a final message for the church in the city of

Ephesus, so he sends a message to the church elders to meet him on his way back, at the seaport of Miletus, about 35 miles away.

It's his final meeting with believers with whom he lived and for whom he feels a real affection and this is an emotional meeting because they know it will be their last. And this is the message Paul leaves with them.

Read Acts 20: 32 -35

32 And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. 33 I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. 34 You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. 35 In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

What is Paul urging here?

Paul is speaking to the church elders - people who lived in a commercial centre and were used to measuring values in gold and silver – and for whom material prosperity was important, yet after he commends them to God's grace, for their sanctification and their inheritance of salvation, he urges them to *work to support the weak* – in other words, he urges them to generosity.

Generosity is at the heart of who God is and always has been.

God's generosity means grace and gifts from God have always been given to God's children – so that we know God's generosity to us and so we can be the means of bringing about God's generosity in the lives of others.

There are times when God sends quail, manna and wild strawberries and we simply say "Thank you"

And there are times when God looks for us to bring about his generosity towards others, when God looks for the gift of generosity at work in us.

End this session with a time of reflection, sitting in God's presence, asking God to speak clearly to you as you think about your attitude to sharing: sharing what you have and sharing your gifts

- Ask God if there is something generous you should be doing at this time

- Think, about a current call on your time or our talents ... Is there something you should give up? Or take up?
- If you are aware that there are things stopping you acting with generosity, ask yourself what these are ... whether it's not believing you have anything worth sharing, or not having confidence in God to act - or the more mundane fear of running out of something ... or allowing other things to take up too much of your time ...or just not wanting to be bothered ...

Offer your thoughts to God and end this session with prayer – your own or the one below.

Gracious and generous God, thank you for your grace to me; thank you for the outpouring of your love and blessing into my life.

Thank you for the gifts you have so generously given to all your children and for the unique gifts that you have given me.

Create in me a pure heart and renew a right spirit within me,
that so I live in the power of your spirit,
using my gifts with generosity and faith.

Amen.