

# St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday 5 November Pentecost 22 Generosity

## Hebrew Bible

### Deuteronomy 26:1-12

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, <sup>2</sup> take some of the first fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name <sup>3</sup> and say to the priest in office at the time, "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." <sup>4</sup> The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. <sup>5</sup> Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. <sup>6</sup> But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. <sup>7</sup> Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. <sup>8</sup> So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. <sup>9</sup> He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; <sup>10</sup> and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me." Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. <sup>11</sup> Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household. <sup>12</sup> When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.

## Gospel

### Matthew 25: 14-25

<sup>14</sup> "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup> to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup> The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup> In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup> But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup> After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' <sup>21</sup> His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>22</sup> And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' <sup>23</sup> His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>24</sup> Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup> so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

## Contemporary reading

Editor Rebecca Laird in *The Heart of Henri Nouwen* quotes from this Catholic

contemplative's book *Sabbatical Journey*:

I think that generosity has many levels. We have to think generously, speak generously, and act generously. Thinking well of others and speaking well of others is the basis for generous giving. It means that we relate to others as part of our 'gen' or 'kin' and treat them as family. Generosity cannot come from guilt or pity. It has to come from hearts that are fearless and free and are willing to share abundantly all that is given to us.

I love the passage from Deuteronomy, have for years. This was the ancient Jews' view of their life – once they were wandering Arameans, then they were enslaved by an oppressive regime, then deliverance comes – in a mighty numinous movement. As you've heard me and Marcus Borg say more than once, this is one of the various modes of transformation of salvation in scripture. It's a mode of salvation which has nothing to do with a life after this earth; a mode which takes into account the realities of this life and this place; a mode which puts justice, freedom and equality first.

But the point of the Deuteronomy passage is to remind the people – people like you and me – not to take for granted the deliverance they have experienced; to remember to be grateful and gift back each year part of their harvest as a sign of that gratitude. Our theme today is generosity, but in this Deuteronomy passage what is pointed out in this formula (which was to be repeated each time the first fruits were brought to the temple,) this 'generosity' matches generosity already shown. It is a passing forward

Their story which they keep repeating to themselves is: "I was enslaved, I am delivered, I cannot any longer repay the one or ones who delivered me, but I can pass forward to others." In this case, the people supported the new religious system which was able to exist because of that deliverance which they celebrated each Friday at Shabbat, each year at Passover, each year at harvest. The Levite clan were the priests of the nation and so did not have time to farm and herd animals, so the priestly class needed supporting by the people. But the point of giving was not to feed priests, or to please priests or God for that matter. The point was to, with humility, recognise the great gifts which had already been received, freedom, justice and equality. The point was to give generously out of that gratitude.

Some of you will know what it means to be delivered. You have had times equivalent to the experience of those Hebrew slaves in Egypt so gratitude is alive within you. You know what I'm talking about. Others here may not have been delivered out of a particular pit of despair like Egypt. In a way you are more like the Pharaoh class rather than the slave class. But that privilege; upper middle class, educated, employed or superannuated, New Zealand privilege is something we should not take for granted. Our life diminishes if we cling on to what is ours, hands clenched rather than open, hearts closed off rather than loving. And besides, who can abide waste? The Gospel reading reminds us we all have gifts – sometimes money, other times, our time or our skills and abilities – talents of a different sort to the ones in the parable. Will we just bury them all and let them rot in the ground?

In 2004 Diana Butler Bass searched for mainstream churches in the States which were vital and intentional. She identified 10 spiritual practices which she believed created that vitality – she found at least one and sometimes more practices in each congregation - Her list included: Hospitality, Discernment, Healing, Contemplation, Testimony, Diversity, Justice, Worship, Reflection, and Beauty. Specifically giving money or serving others in the congregation is not mentioned in her list, but these practices are generous, open handed practices – hospitality, healing, justice, testimony – these are sharing practices – and bothering to ensure beauty is present requires generosity of spirit as well as openness of pocket.

Bouncing off Diana Butler Nass's ideas, another writer about church<sup>1</sup> describes how in his parish, practices flow into one another. The **Practice of Discernment is fundamental and** flows into the **Practice of Story-Telling**. He writes: "The stories we tell about ourselves and about God have the capacity to shape—or to inhibit—the people we can become and the lives we can lead." When we move on to the practice of proclamation – the stories we tell about God can be mean-spirited and angry, or they can be open flowing and generous. He continues: "These stories open up, or close off, the very **Practice of Hospitality** that we envision for congregational life. Are we merely tolerant of those who are strangers or different from us? Or do we attempt to be inclusive? Or can we go further to risk "radical hospitality,"—moving from mere inclusion to what theologian Miroslav Volf calls "embrace," or what Adelle Frank at the Church of the Brethren describes as "intentional vulnerability," which is what Benedictine Sister Joan Chittester means, I think, when she speaks of living "without clenched fists"?"

From this hospitality can flow a **Practice of Service** "In what my own parish calls "prophetic hospitality," we not only expect to be changed by those who invite themselves through our doors, but we also have begun [to see] that an essential part of this change is learning about our common calling to go with our new neighbours and friends back out of those same doors to participate together in God's redemptive transformation of the world." And this kind of prophetic serving requires at its heart the **Practice of Generosity**. You can see that Discernment leads to Story-Telling, then Proclamation, on to Radical Hospitality and Transformative Service which requires the Practice of Stewardship which in turn depends on the Practice of Generosity.

We do not give to please others, even to support others, nor do we give to avoid punishment or disapproval. These are only side benefits. We need to give because to be generous opens our own hearts to the joy and the privilege of being human. When we are generous, we are better human beings. A generous community is therefore one in which all are more able to reach the potential within us.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://alban.org/archive/vital-congregations-as-intentional-communities-of-practice/>