

Today marks the launch of our annual Stewardship Campaign, and I want to take as a text the last verse of our epistle from 2 Corinthians where St. Paul writes this, "The brothers are going ahead to you to arrange for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion."

Well, today, October the 16th, as well as being the launch of our Stewardship Campaign, is also Rebecca's birthday. And I'd like to mark it. So Rebecca, happy birthday.

I googled the question, why do we give people birthday presents? And I got the following answer. We give presents to people to show that we are grateful for them and that we value the role they play in our lives. Well, that seemed like a very good answer to me. I'm very grateful for Rebecca, for all she does in my life and all she does in the life of our church and our community. So I was delighted to have the opportunity to publicly express those feelings in a gift. And it seems to me that our response to the Stewardship Campaign has certain similarities with the giving of a birthday gift. And it's not just that they both come round once a year. The most significant comparison being that both of these gifts, the stewardship pledge and a birthday gift, come from a place of love.

I'm talking today about a giving that comes more from the heart than it does the wallet. It says in 1 John, "We love because God first loved us". I think it might also be said that we give, because God first gave to us. We give a loved one a birthday gift as an expression of our love towards them. So we give to God in response to all that he has given to us. Giving to God is an expression of thanksgiving and gratitude. It's an acknowledgement that all we have comes as a gift from him, as we'll be saying at our offertory moment later, "All things come from you, oh Lord, and of your own have we given you".

Our gospel reading hints at what the opposite of this kind of giving might look like. Let me tell the story that Jesus told in that parable, as being not about a widow, but being about instead a rector. In which case it might go something like this. "In that city, the rector kept going to his people and saying, 'Give me money to keep the church going'. For a while the people refused, but later they said to themselves, 'because this rector keeps bothering me, I will give him some money so that he does not wear me out by continually asking'. Now, if that's how I come across to you today, I'm sorry. That's not my intention. Instead, I want to stand before you at

the start of the Stewardship Campaign and invite you to give in response to the love and the grace that we have received from God in Christ Jesus. So what we are talking about today is a voluntary gift, not an extortion.

I've talked about the end of that epistle in two Corinthians. I want to just say a word also about how that passage begins. Paul begins the passage by saying, "Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the Ministry to the Saints". And the background to this passage is that Paul is going around all the churches in the Mediterranean that he founded, and he's taking up a collection. He's told the church in Jerusalem that he'll take a collection to support the great work that they're doing amongst the poor and the needy. That which was work that the church in Corinth knew all about, hence the fact he didn't need to tell them anymore about the Ministry of the Saints.

And it might well be that Paul's being a bit cheeky here. He's telling the church in Corinth that he's been boasting about their generosity to the church in Macedonia, thereby no doubt setting off a bit of rivalry. And he's writing to tell them that he's sending a couple of the brothers down to see them, so they make the arrangement for the generous and bountiful gift. He wants to avoid a potentially embarrassing experience where the Macedonians arrive in Corinth having heard all about the generosity of the Corinthians, only to find that Paul has to remind them of the bountiful gift that they've offered. But that's by the by. The point I want to bring out is that Paul was taking up a collection for the Ministry to the Saints.

And so, it is with us. We're not merely fundraising. The Stewardship Campaign is not about bringing in funds to keep the St. James show on the road. It's about maintaining the mission that we've been given by God to fulfill in this place, to love God, to love each other, and to love our neighbor. And this isn't the place where I'll be telling you in detail about the Ministry to the Saints. You'll be hearing more about that later. You might watch the videos that we're putting on the website, which tell you about the Ministry to the Saints.

So if you are on the church database, you'll be receiving a letter from me this week with a form inviting you to be part of our annual Stewardship Campaign. And I encourage you to respond positively to make a voluntary gift for the Ministry to the Saints. Amen.