

## joy+poverty=generosity

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*Reflecting on 2 Corinthians 8*

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God's abundance is always so much more than we can ever imagine.

I wonder if, like me, you have houseplants. I seem to have accumulated rather a lot of them over the years, and watering them is now a bit of an undertaking. This becomes a particularly acute problem if we go away, especially if the weather is hot. I give them a good drink before we go, and try to move them to shady spots, but we've still had the odd casualty. So I was intrigued to read about a very simple system that you can set up, to help with this problem – you might have come across it.

It just involves a sink, a draining board, and an old towel. You fill the sink with water, and put the towel on the draining board, with one end in the water. Then you put your plants on the draining board, on top of the towel. And then something wonderful happens – I expect you've got there before me. The water creeps up the towel, by capillary action, and the plants can drink. The drier and thirstier they are, the more water gets drawn into the towel, and the more they receive.

This is such a handy piece of advice. And it's commonly available on the internet. But St. Paul got there first.

*'And now, brothers and sisters,' he says, 'we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity'.*

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. What an extraordinary combination.

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You can imagine a severe trial and poverty going together. And you can imagine overflowing joy and rich generosity going together. But *all* of them together? And not only that, but this weird equation:

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What is Paul talking about?

First of all, let's look at why he was writing this.

Some people think that his first letter to the Corinthians was really a bit hard for them to take – a bit strong for them. And it turned some people against him. So the first section of this second letter aims to win them back – to re-focus them on the important things, and in order to do that, to re-build trust between them and Paul. He shows his workings to them, explaining about future plans. He appeals directly to them for reconciliation. And then he also asks, in this passage, about a collection.

This is a collection for the church in Jerusalem, which is referenced in several of Paul's letters. We first read about it in his First Letter to the Corinthians, in Chapter 16, verse 2: *'On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn...And when I arrive I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem'*.

There are many theories as to why Paul was encouraging the churches to make a collection for Jerusalem. It could have been because of a famine, or some other hardship. But the way Paul speaks of it suggests that, whatever the circumstances, he sees it as an obligation – as part of the churches' fellowship and worship. The importance of it isn't only with regard to the recipients, but also to those whom he is inviting to give. This collection is, to Paul, an essential outworking of faith in Jesus Christ, for the community he's writing to: *'Here,'* he says, as he urges the Corinthians to give, *'is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter'*.

But why is he urging them here? Why this nudge? Well, it looks as if the Corinthians were keen on the idea Paul outlined in his first letter. *'Last year,'*

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he says, *'you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so'*. But subsequently, they seem to have lost the fire for it – or, even if they still think it's a good idea, to have stopped actually giving. Someone, probably Titus, will have told Paul that the pattern of giving he'd set up with them wasn't working any more. So he's prompting them to understand, to re-engage, to feel once again the desire to live in this way - and he's showing them how to get on and do it.

And so, when he talks about other churches – the Macedonian churches – and their sacrificial giving, I don't think he's doing it in that rather discouraging way that we sometimes do with children: *'You're not sitting up straight like little George over there – look at how good he's being; why can't you be like that?!'* This, I think, is different. He's not trying to shame them into doing the right thing. Instead, he's saying, here's how it actually is with God. Here's a worked example.

And, as we've spotted before, it's a pretty extraordinary worked example. Because it's an example of that really surprising equation:  
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Jesus, Paul says, was rich, but for your sake, he became poor. As he wrote to the Philippians, Jesus *'did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...'*

Jesus is fully God – filled with divine joy. It is through him that all things have come into being. He is the love that holds us in existence. And yet he emptied himself. He endured the severest of trials. He became nothing. And he did all of this for us. As he defeats death, so we receive his new life. Joy and poverty overflow into the generosity of his risen existence.

This is what it's all about, says Paul. This is how we are to be as disciples of Jesus.

We might be poor financially. But in a broader sense, regardless of our situations, we are all poor: step one in this is to recognise that we are empty vessels. We don't get it. We fall short. We are too tempted by the wrong

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things. We choose not to love. But, knowing our poverty, Jesus longs for us to know his joy, so that, as it interacts with that poverty, we can be filled with his generosity. Paul puts this beautifully, a little earlier in the letter [2 Cor 4], when he says that God *'has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God...We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible...'* Jesus fills our emptiness with his abundance.

Or, to put it in a much less poetic way, we are like that dry towel. If you dip even a bit of it into that sink full of water, the water will spread up it. This is what the Macedonian churches did, in that worked example: *'They gave themselves first of all to the Lord'*, says Paul. They dipped themselves in the joy of Jesus, and so they found themselves filled with his generosity.

But this isn't the end of it. We carry the death of Jesus in our bodies, Paul says, *'so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible'*. We've been filled with Jesus's generosity. And that's worth noticing – it's *Jesus's* generosity. Through his poverty, he fills our poverty with his riches. And so we can't just hang on to it. Here's the next bit of the example: *'They gave themselves first of all to the Lord,'* says Paul, *'and then by the will of God also to us'*. It's part of God's generosity, that we have to pay it forward. The water that's drawn up that towel doesn't just stay in the towel; it brings relief to the dry cells of those plants – it fills them with life again. But that doesn't mean that the towel dries out. As it gives the water to the plants, more water is drawn up from the well into which it's dipped.

So this generosity is a gift. And it's a gift which carries, as part of it, the necessity of passing it on. And as we pass it on, so we receive more. This is how, by the alchemy of God's grace, sacrifice brings blessing.

Sounds great. But Paul comes back to the fact that they're not doing it. *'Now finish the work,'* he says, *'so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it...'*

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I don't know about you, but naturally, I'd side with the Corinthians. It all makes such a lot of sense...but I'd rather not risk it.

If we find ourselves feeling, very understandably, like this – lapsing into the state the Corinthians found themselves in – then this is where we need to face the fact that, in our lives as Christians, generosity is not in the 'nice to have' category. It's who we are.

And Paul very cannily understands one of the things that might, for the Corinthians, be getting in the way. He wonders whether, because they haven't quite understood, they're thinking that what he calls 'excelling in the grace of giving' entails just making themselves poorer and poorer. If you're thinking that, he says, then think again – match your willingness to do it with your completion of it, he says, *'for if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.'*

Once again, he reminds us that what we're giving is God's already. He's not asking us to do the impossible – but if we are responding to God's abundance, then part of that response is giving back to God, by actually giving to other people. Though it will undoubtedly benefit them, Paul's point is not that this is best for the people of Jerusalem – but that it is best for the people of Corinth. The abundance of God needs to become everyday abundance, through them.

It's worth noticing, too, that our idea of what's possible for us probably isn't the same as *God's* idea of what's possible for us. 'What one has' shouldn't only be taken at one's own estimation. We're likely to underestimate our gifts; whereas God, the source of them all, knows the truth. This is how Paul can say of the Macedonians, *'...they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability'*. This isn't urging us into overdrafts! But it is encouraging the Corinthians – and us - to be bold. To push ourselves. To trust that God will bless our giving, and to be abundant in our generosity, because we are giving what is his already.

So at the beginning of this Generosity Week, it's a good time for us to take to heart, and act upon, Paul's nudge to the church in Corinth. To remember that everything we have is God's already. To remember that we need to put the

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end of that towel in the water – to dip ourselves into the generosity of Jesus. To be confident that, if we do this, that extraordinary equation really will work, and we really will receive:

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And as we receive that generosity, to be bold in recognising that paying it forward is part of who we are, as Christians. And that God is not asking us to do the impossible – but that what's possible is probably more than we think!

You are already filled with grace and generosity, and I pray that, as God's beloved people wherever you are, you will receive from him abundantly in the weeks to come. And for all of us, I pray that we might be given the courage to act on that abundance even more, so that we excel in the grace of giving – for the glory of Jesus, and in his name.

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