

## Tithing – A Sermon for Low Sunday 2009

Exodus 14 vv 10-31 p72, Exodus 15 vv 20 & 21 p73, Ps 133, Acts 4 vv 32-35 p1096, I John 1 v1 – 2v2 p1223, John 20 vv 19-31 p1089

Someone rang me up in the week to ask me what I thought about the practice of tithing and what the Church of England teaches about it. Tithing is the practice of giving 10% of your income to the Church. Someone this lady knew had just joined a church where tithing was the normal practice, as it is in many Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches, but not so much in “middle of the road”, high Anglican and Roman Catholic circles. It tends to be a controversial issue. Those who tithe have a tendency to become self-righteous about it and those who do not tithe often resent any suggestion that perhaps they should.

Personally, I am no stranger to the practice of tithing. When I was a child I had a great uncle who was the minister of a Pentecostal church where tithing was the norm. Although it was a small church in a very poor area, that church was never short of money and they never had any fundraising events. Those members of my family who supported tithing would point out that the church was able to get on with its mission without any money worries and believed that God richly blessed those who tithed their meagre incomes so that, while poor in worldly terms, they never lacked for anything that really mattered. On the other hand, those members of my family who did not believe in tithing thought that the church (and maybe its minister) had grown rich at the expense of poor people, who ought not to have been expected to give so generously.

For many years, while not believing that everybody ought necessarily to tithe, tithing has been my own personal practice and I divide a tenth part of my income between donations to the Church and other aspects of God’s work such as missions and charities. God has never let me down.

But where does the practice of tithing come from and is it meant to be universal? Should all Christians give a tenth of their resources to the Church? Do we tithe only money? Do we tithe goods? (Originally, most tithes must actually have been paid in kind.) Is there a sense in which we ought to tithe everything we have, setting aside a definite proportion of our time and our talents for God? If you want to go down that road, maybe it is 1/7<sup>th</sup>, not 1/10<sup>th</sup> of our time that God asks for as we observe a weekly sabbath.

Offering a tithe or tenth is a very ancient custom and is taken for granted throughout the Old Testament. The goods and money raised provide for the maintenance of priests and ministers. They pay for the Temple worship. They are alms for the poor. Neither Jesus nor the apostles in the New Testament say anything specific about tithing. What conclusion we ought to draw from their silence I will discuss later.

The first mention of tithing in the Bible is in Genesis 14. Abraham fought and won a major battle, rescuing (among others) the city of Jerusalem from military defeat. Melchizedek, priest and king, brought Abraham bread and wine and Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. This is a very significant episode in the Bible story and is taken up in Hebrews 7. Melchizedek is a “type” of Jesus, Who is the true King and Priest. He offers us Himself in Bread and Wine and He receives our offering in response – our souls and bodies, a living

sacrifice. In Genesis 28, Jacob has a vision of a ladder reaching to Heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. God promises Jacob that He will keep him safe in his flight from the Holy Land, that his descendants will multiply as the dust of the earth, and that they will inherit the land. God also promises Jacob, “in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed”. That too is a prophecy of Jesus, the descendant (or seed) of Jacob in Whom people of every nation under Heaven receive the Blessing of God. Jacob’s response to God’s promise: “of all that thou wilt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto thee.”

As I said before, the New Testament says nothing either for or against the practice of Christian tithing, but before we discuss why not, I must mention tithing in England. From the Middle Ages until well into the C20, tithes were payable by law to the established Church. They were often the cause of resentment and controversy specially to those who did not belong to the established Church. Compulsory tithes imposed by law are a world away from voluntary tithing in response to the love of God and legal tithes have very little to do with the subject of today’s sermon. Also their commutation and abolition are too legally complicated for my poor brain to comprehend.

So why didn’t Jesus or Paul say anything about whether or not Christians should tithe? I guess the trivial reason is that Jewish Christians probably continued to tithe without questioning the practice until the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70AD. I think the more important reason, however, is that for Jesus and the early Church, there is no limit to our giving. Jesus does not want members of the Church who say to God, “I’ve earned £20,000 this year, Lord. So here’s your £2,000 and now I’ve done my duty. What a good Christian I am.” Or even, “I faithfully give you 10% of the profits on my company every year. Isn’t it about time you made me rich?” Or even, “I give up every Sunday and a couple of evenings a week, Lord. Can’t I do what I want for the rest of the time?”

In our reading from Acts, it says that *the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul*. They shared everything they had with one another within the fellowship of the Church, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Body of the Risen Christ. Back in Acts 2, it speaks of the early Church meeting daily for worship in the Temple and breaking bread together in their houses. Was this a Eucharistic event or a simple fellowship meal? Or was there no clear distinction? Did they feel that the Risen Christ was always present when they shared their food with other Christians, other members of the Body of Christ? They listened to the apostles’ teaching. They attended to the Word of God. They bore faithful witness to the Risen Christ and God added to their number daily such as should be saved.

I do not think Christians are called to tithe in the sense of giving God a tenth of what they have and holding back the remaining 90% for themselves. I think that we are called to offer back to God everything that we have, every moment of our lives and, indeed, everything that we are. That is what it means to love God with all our heart, mind, soul & strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Our offertory is not limited to a tithe. Our offertory is to share in the Spirit of Him Who offered His Life for the sins of the world.