

Stewardship

15th Sunday after Trinity, Creation 2

Readings: *Genesis 2:4b-10,15, Luke 12:13-21*

Opening Prayer:

May God take these human words and transform them through his Holy Spirit for the purposes of the Kingdom. Amen.

Introduction – Stewardship vs. ownership

Have you ever been tasked with taking care of something or someone? Perhaps you've house sat for a friend, or looked after a pet for a neighbour who was going away on holiday. Childminders and teachers take on responsibility for the growth and development of the children and young people in their care.

The expectations are different in how you behave, though, compared to something that is yours, aren't they? There are things that I might say to my own children that I

wouldn't to others. When I was paid by a neighbour as a teenager to water their plants and mow their lawn while they were away, I was far more diligent than I manage in my own home. When it comes to pets, I'm not sure we actually own our cat, Pepper. I'm pretty certain that she doesn't see it like that.

In all these ways, and more, in every-day life we are invited to be stewards of things, of creatures, of people. This is a theme that the season of creation places before us, and at times this raises some difficult questions, as our two readings do today.

Genesis: God creates, provides, entrusts

Our reading from Genesis might be familiar. It's the second of the two creation narratives at the beginning of the Bible, a complement to the days of creation outlined in Genesis 1. The emphasis and action of the passage is clear – God creates and provides abundantly, and humans are part of that creation and provision, that intention and purpose for the world.

But verse 15 is also key – “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” The Garden, and by extension the whole of creation, is not something that we have made ourselves, or have earned. It is not for us to possess, but rather for us to steward, to care for, to work with God to look after.

This is the original vocation ordained by God for which all humans are made. We are not meant to be ravenous consumers of our world, like a plague of locusts devastating all in our path. We are called to be stewards of our world, working in harmony with it.

Luke: What do we do with what we receive?

This is reinforced by our reading from Luke of the parable of the rich fool. Jesus tells this short parable, having avoided adjudicating a dispute about inheritance. The question we’re invited to consider is “why is this man a fool?”

It’s not because he has an abundant harvest – that is a blessing from God. Joseph and Pharaoh were not fools when they stored the abundant harvest in the good years in order to provide for the people in the years of famine. The issue is in the rich fool’s mindset when this blessing comes.

Let me read verses 17-19 again, but I’ll put some emphasis on some of the pronouns:

He thought to himself, “What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.”

¹⁸ ‘Then he said, “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

When presented with a blessing from God – whether in part due to his own hard work or prudence, or primarily down to the weather and conditions – the rich man thinks only of himself. There is no thankfulness to God or prayer

about what he should do. There is no thought for the community or others. It is all about pleasing his own desires. There is no sense of gratefulness, gift or responsibility, of loving his neighbour or God.

Stewardship vs. ownership revisited

The purpose of any parable is to get us to reflect, to place ourselves within the context of the story, and to ask questions of ourselves.

The challenge of both readings, and of this season, is to think about how we, as Christians, treat the world and the things, creatures, and people in it. Do I really own the money in my pocket, or my car, or my family, my pet, this church, the world? Is it mine to do with as I please, to bend to my will? Am I an owner, or am I actually a steward, a caretaker?

For some of us, perhaps, we are uncomfortable with the idea that our hard-earned house and possessions, our cherished friends and family, our skills and abilities, our

time, are not completely ours. “I earned them, they’re mine.”

For others there might seem an easy answer: “of course we’re stewards of God’s creation,” but perhaps there are other parts of our lives that we want to keep God out of, or time when we treat the world as ours to use as we will.

I’d hope we don’t go to the extreme of Gollum from the Lord of the Rings – “It came to me, my own, my love... my... precioussssss.” – or even saying to others or God “We wants it, we needs it. Must have the precious.” However, if I’m honest there are moments when that’s exactly how I respond to God. “You can’t have it, it’s mine!”

There’s a danger, perhaps, that we end up feeling resentful, like God has an unfair claim on what we have, or thinking that God is treating us like we’re slaves, but that’s not what God wants for us either.

Ultimately, though, everything we have is God's gift. We say the prayer of David sometimes when we offer our collection and gifts to God during communion services – “Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.” Christian stewardship asks us to prayerfully consider what God wants us to do with what he has entrusted to us. It does not demand, but instead invites us to be generous in response to God’s generosity to us, rather than having a scarcity mindset.

Christian stewardship in practise

Now this might seem good, even easy, in principle, or safe when it comes to how we treat animals and the world. However, it is really hard when we start to think about other areas of our lives as individuals and as a church.

It isn’t easy to talk about money, for example. We don’t do it often in church and I’m not sure we often do it well. I have known I needed to preach this sermon for some time, and it’s been one of the hardest I’ve ever had to write and give. I hope it will come across in the way it’s meant, which is with compassion, love, and hope.

Good stewardship as a church

So for us as a church, good stewardship means we are working to be more honest and open about our church finances. The leaflet we’ve written and given out today is part of that, and talks about where things stand at the moment.

Myself, the Wardens, and our PCC are trying our best to be good stewards of what we’ve been entrusted with by God and previous generations. We try to be both prudent and generous, looking outwards to our mission as God’s people in our community. However, all that costs money and our buildings need some attention if they are to serve God and Hucclecote well for years to come. We are trying to make sure our expenses are reasonable, and to

raise funds through events, seek grants, and hire our buildings. However, the reality is that we are heavily reliant on donations, both regular and one-off.

We need to make sure that our giving is sufficient to not only sustain the ministry God has entrusted to us, but also to realise the vision he has given us for where we go next on our journey.

Good stewardship as individuals

I know that many of us, many in our community, already give generously in various ways, and I want to say a huge and heart-felt thank you for your faithfulness. I realise that many of us are on tight budgets and fixed incomes, and that there are many pressures on our personal finances at the moment too, often outside our control. Giving to church should never be at the expense of health or cause hardship.

I'm also realistic that there are many good causes that we might, as individuals, feel called to support.

So I'm not going to give a crude call to 'give us your money' or set a particular target. Instead, I'd invite everyone to prayerfully reflect on what God is calling them to give out of what he has given you.

If you give regularly to our church, thank you! If you don't and would like more information about how to, there is an A5 information sheet on the table by the door. Our preferred method is via the Parish Giving Scheme, because they automatically obtain gift-aid on our behalf, and there is even an option you can select which ensures that your giving amount keeps pace with inflation every year.

Wills

We have also been blessed in the past few years with a number of unexpected legacies - gifts given in people's wills. You may not have noticed, but this week has been Remember a Charity week where over 200 charities collaborate to encourage people to think about

leaving gifts in their wills. Legacies have become a significant source of support for charities in recent years - among charity supporters aged 40 and over, 22% say they have already included a charitable gift in their Will, compared with 14% in 2010.

As a PCC we are in the process of developing a policy around legacy giving to make sure that we are good stewards of such gifts, while also setting healthy boundaries in line with safeguarding. Legacy giving should never be at the expense of taking care of family or personal needs, but it is another way that people can contribute to the sustained mission of our church, and we as PCC are committed to making sure this is for clear and tangible projects. For example, the money to pay for the new church noticeboard at the front gate came from a Legacy given by Nancy Lockwood.

Let me stress – no-one should feel an obligation to give a Legacy, but if it's something you would like to do and would like more information, then are packs in purple envelopes at the back. We'll also show a video which has

been put together by our Deanery at the end of the service.

Time & talents

And of course money is not the only way that we give of ourselves and are good stewards, any more than caring for creation is. We can give our time and our talents, and on this I feel so blessed as your Priest-in-Charge because so many people give of themselves in this way across our church. If there are other ways that you'd like to give and would like to find out how, please talk to myself, Chris, Kevin, Margaret Edwards, or others you see already volunteering. Thank you for all the ways that people give of their time and skills. It is so very much appreciated, and an amazing witness to others.

Remembering our primary vocation as stewards

As I come to a close, let me return to our first reading. Ultimately, our primary vocation as human beings is to be stewards. We are invited by God to be good stewards of this world in all its beauty and fragility, good stewards of the blessings that God has given us in terms of our time, our talents, and yes our finances and possessions too. Good stewards of one another as we journey with Jesus.

Our challenge is to prayerfully consider what God wants us to do with what he has entrusted to us. My prayer is that we are given more opportunities and more capacity to be generous in response to the generosity that God has shown us. Amen.