

God is a God of Abundance

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost—28 September 2014

Philippians 2.1-13

Well, some of you would have already heard, but here is the news again. St Philip's, our church here, has received a bequest from the late Carola Parke. We knew that this bequest was coming but we had no idea when or how much. Last Monday we finally received the cheque in the mail; it was for \$——— dollars. I will let you all take a breath and just process that amount.

It is an extraordinary amount of money. What is remarkable about this is that Carola gave this gift with no strings attached. Unlike many bequests given to charities and churches, there are no caveats on how it can be used and for what purpose. This is of course a great blessing but a great challenge.

Ever since I found out about the amount I have experienced a range of emotions from elation to terror. This amount of money is a game changer. It is somewhat like winning the lottery. People who have won the lottery will tell you that the new wealth may bring lots of good things but it also brings new responsibilities, the stress of making choices never before possible, the way it changes how the person responds and reacts to issues and needs and the impact it has on relationships in and out of the family. Money is a blessing and necessary but, as Jesus warns us, the love of money is the root of all evil.

And so in this sermon time I would like to offer some thoughts, some theological reflection, on what this gift means and how we can manage this together.

When I was sharing this news with Bishop Stephen Pickard on Friday. After he nearly fell off his chair and took a breath, he said that one of the key challenges for Christians is how they live with the idea of an abundant God.

Politicians, commentators, economists, the media of all sorts will take every opportunity to tell us that we live in a world where everything essential is scarce. We can all buy into the myth that there is not enough to go around. The energy crisis pivots on not having enough. In the name of national and economic security, we exercise influence in far-reaching places to secure enough energy. It is a worldview of scarcity. Billions starve because our culture operates with a system that limits distribution of goods and resources in order to protect the security of the few. The more we have, the more we want to hold on for fear that it will not last and then we will not have enough.

But this is not how God operates.

Just think about the abundance of God. God is a God of grace, of overflowing love. The extraordinary gift from Carola is an expression of God's abundant love. Yet such a vast sum of money ought not blind us to all the other instances of God's abundance.

God, all the time, gives us all that we need, and much more.

God has bequeathed creation, the whole universe with such beauty and goodness. There is air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat, a climate we can survive in, raw materials from which to make a wealth of structures and machines, intelligence to be able to make them, etc. We have

been given eyes to see, ears to hear, noses to smell, tongues to taste and skin to feel with. We have hearts to love him and each other, and spirits that can be united with his spirit.

In our physical world, the sun is a good symbol of the abundance of God. It is a light that is forever shining, in all directions at all times. It illuminates everything, bringing clarity. Its inexhaustible light gives life. There is nothing that any of us need to do to “earn” this light. It simply shines on us.

At Kankinya nursing home on Saturday one of our dear parishioners asked me in the middle of the service, “Pastor, does God love an evil person?” I had to say yes. Jesus, in Matthew's sermon on the mount, likened God's love to the sun, that shines on both the good and evil: perplexing and disturbing but true.

In our Philippians reading today Paul gives us that great hymn of God's abundant love. In Christ, God comes to us, and gives his whole being, his very self in an extraordinary and abundant act of love. God gives up God's self to bring us into an everlasting relationship with him. There is not much more you can give than your very self, your whole life. This loving gift is freely given - it is grace enfleshed and handed over for the good of the other.

There are signs of God's abundance everywhere. Just look at the bursting forth of life at the moment in the beautiful spring weather. On Friday evening I got to hold and cuddle little Ronan David Gowty, a precious sign of the miracle of life and the abundance of love.

Yesterday evening I was sitting at one of O'Connor's three ponds and was delighted when a father and mother wood duck shepherded eight little ducklings out onto the open water and lead them to the other side. A rationalist materialist might see just the end result of millions of years of evolution and adaptation of an Anseriforme. A theologian and person of faith will see the abundance and provision of God and be in awe.

One of the moments I get to experience every week is pure grace and abundance. At Kankinya, which is, as you know, a dementia-specific nursing home, I get to say the words of peace to each person at the service and to give them communion. As I go around the room, kneel down in front of these dear people, and share God's peace with them, they stare into my eyes, hold my hands and with warmth and delight give it back to me. They say the most beautiful things like, “I love you”, “Thank you”, “God be with you too”. They share tears and smiles. These are mostly old people who can barely remember their names, who were once tiny babies like Ronan, but now in the twilight of their lives are just as dependent and fragile as he is, yet love and grace shines through them like a beacon.

One of the things that have completely surprised me is the blessing of God's timing. Last weekend we had the official opening of the Lamerton Centre. We finally celebrated an extraordinary achievement. A new and much needed new building, the refurbishment of our courtyard and car park, a reorganization of the parish spaces. Nearly three years ago we stepped out in faith, trusted the goodness of God and gave of ourselves—time, energy, money. We did all this with nothing in the bank save some funds put aside by Pandora's. So there we were last Saturday, singing, dancing and rejoicing, feeling a great sense of accomplishment and a great sense of community. The next day, there was a cheque for \$———— in the mail. It is like we have been journeying through the wilderness, having to trust in God, and bang we are at the Promised Land and abundance rains down upon us.

Imagine if we had received Carola's bequest a month, a year, even two years ago? We would not

have experienced the extraordinary abundance and generosity of God pouring through each one of us. We would have had a nice building, little money left and no dancing and no powerful sense of achievement and community. God has indeed been good to us.

However, like the Israelites and the Promised Land we have the potential to make a right mess of things. The Promised Land was given to the ancient Hebrews so they could be a blessing to the rest of the world. The promise of the blessings to Abraham was so that his descendants would be a blessing to others. We all know how many of the judges and nearly all the Kings of Ancient Israel, their priests and people, failed in their task to be blessing. We too have the potential to misuse and waste blessing, to not give as God gives to us. The whole point of God's blessing is that it is a gift for all.

So finally I would like to point us to two things that we can immediately do in response to God's abundant gift to us we find in Carola's generosity. Two things that will help us as a community manage this extraordinary blessing and stay balanced and true. They come from Paul's message to us today from Philippians.

Firstly, we can give thanks and praise to God. We can, and we ought to, figuratively or truly, fall on our knees and praise God for his abundant love to us. Secondly, we can put on that same attitude that Jesus Christ had, the virtue of humility and self-sacrifice. For that's the key you know. At the centre of God's abundance is a cross.

Perhaps it is best if I read again this section from Philippians. I am going to read it from the Good News version so we may perhaps hear the words afresh. I am going to read it and let the words sit with you as give thanks for God's abundant love.

Philippians