



The blessings of the Christmas Appeal that set us free

A sermon by Revd Nicholas Holtam

Readings: Isaiah 11.1-10; Matthew 3.1-12

At yesterday's Requiem for Colin Slee, the Dean of Southwark Cathedral, it was said that his first act as Dean was to take down a sign which said, "Worship in Progress. Cathedral Closed". In the sermon, Jeffrey John said it was a mistake to think of Colin as an 'arch-liberal' for that would be to serve a secular agenda. Colin believed that God is big hearted, generous and loving and that churches should reflect this by being more concerned about who they invite in rather than who they keep out.

Colin used to say he thought of St Martin's as the Southwark Cathedral of the north bank. I thought it was the other way round but this church has had long experience of being open for all sorts and today's Christmas Appeal is a case in point. The appeal started because the first broadcast of a church service came from St Martin's on 6th January 1924. It was a risk too great for St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey to take. As was memorably said in a speech at the Church Assembly, "You wouldn't know where people would listen. It might be in a Public House, with their hats on." St Martin's did that first ever broadcast of a service on the Feast of the Epiphany, the making Christ known to the Gentile world, and we have been greatly blessed by this ministry of broadcasting, which was so controversial at first and very quickly came to be regarded jealously.

The regular monthly broadcasts by Dick Sheppard included twice a year his inviting the invisible congregation, larger than any other preacher had known, to give to the collection and help the work of St Martin's with people in need. This did so well that after three years the Director General of the BBC, John Reith, thought the collection should be regularised. They came up with the idea of having a week's good cause broadcast each Sunday so that other charities could benefit. St Martin's would have the Christmas Appeal, and the BBC has generously continued this for 84 years. It is a unique tradition. Last year's raised nearly £900,000 and because it is collected mostly by volunteers nearly all of it goes directly to help homeless people through The Connection at St Martin's and people in great need all over the country through the rather quaintly named Vicar's Relief Fund.

Sally Flatman, the Producer of the Christmas Appeal, is very skilled at listening to staff and clients and of telling a story for the radio listeners. A number of themes emerged this year. One that I used is that giving is good for us. It's part of what makes us human, to be generous to others and do to others as we would want them to do to us. That's what Jesus taught but it's universal wisdom. Confucius said the same. It's special this year to hear Rosemary Morgan in the programme about how last year's appeal was used, 'Received with Thanks'. She has been giving every year for over 60 years because she was very moved by the Vicar, it must have been Eric Loveday, making the appeal at the end of the War. And a man from Leicester whose family was helped by the Vicar's Relief Fund in the 1950's, now makes a point of giving to help others.

The responses to the Appeal are a great act of charity. You might have heard one of the trailers the BBC have been playing during the week in which Richard, my colleague, said that one of the homeless men had given away his shoes to someone who needed them more. It's the same charity but like the widow's mite, the personal cost is higher if you yourself are homeless. Giving is good for us; it makes us human.

There's something else about the gift to this church made by homeless people. When we had finished recording this year, Sally asked me how I felt about my predecessors. She and I feel the weight of responsibility of their legacy and our inheritance. I feel that I know each of them intimately, partly through standing in their shoes, partly through some of you because there is still a living memory in this congregation that goes back to Dick Sheppard who made the first Christmas Appeal in 1927, and I have also got to know them through their families. They were all very able, but what I like about them collectively is that they are delightfully human, and definitely not perfect. That's a marked characteristic of this church community. For clergy and congregation alike there's not a lot of front, and I think this must have something to do with the evident need of some of those who come here seeking help, making it possible for all of us to admit that we too have needs and aspects of our lives that don't add up. We accept each other as we are *and* have high expectations of each other as well as people engaged in the process of repentance and turning to face God.

The location and history of St Martin's has sometimes meant that we have lived slightly ahead of the rest of the Church. I hesitate to say prophetically but certainly in ways that have read the signs of the times and at times been 'cutting edge', like with broadcasting in the 1920's. It's a bit unnerving to discover that there are only two Scriptural tests for true prophecy. The first is, does it fit the tradition of what we know about God? That might mean a radical reinterpretation of Scripture and tradition but does this prophecy fit within Scripture and tradition? John the Baptist is seen by Christians as the last of the Hebrew prophets pointing to the fulfilment of God's promises in Jesus. His message required a reworking of what Christians call the Old Testament. That Jesus is the Messiah is the foundation of Christianity. In the anthem to be sung in a moment 'Jesus Christ the apple tree' is the person through whom God restores us from sin and disobedience associated with the eating of the apple in the Garden of Eden. It is a reinterpretation of ancient mythology in scripture and tradition. The second test of prophecy is does it come true, does it happen? Jesus' statement that by their fruits you shall know them is a version of this, does God bless it?

Desmond Tutu in South Africa said in the 1980's that he was hopeful about the ending of Apartheid because he knew that in God's Kingdom the battle with racism was already won. His faith gave him enormous confidence and an ability to laugh in the face of oppressive wickedness. I feel equally confident now about discrimination on grounds of gender or sexual orientation. It is still a reality, especially in the Church, but cannot possibly withstand the pressure for change because it is simply wrong. What is happening in our day is that the scriptures and tradition are being reinterpreted and the blessings brought by the inclusion of women and gay people are very evident. Churches should be more concerned about who they invite in rather than who they keep out.

Our Advent theme that Christ is 'born to set us free' has a double edge for us on the day of the Christmas Appeal. By acting charitably, lovingly, we can help set one another free. That's the basis of the Christmas Appeal. And some of the people we help are the very people who set us free. Not only are we incomplete without them, they bless us by their presence in this community and set us free from our selfish sins and fears. It is a human and a theological agenda. As Isaiah prophesied:

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
Or decide by what his ears hear:
But with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
And decide with equity for the meek of the earth...

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
The calf and the lion and the fatling together,
And a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah 11.3,4 and 6.

To God be the glory now and for ever. Amen.