

Serving with accountability - Lent Lecture 2016

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I worry that you're all going to be bishopped out by the end of all this! You've had Bishop Stephen talking about living distinctively; you've had Bishop Peter talking about evangelising effectively; next week you have Bishop John talking about re-imagining ministry and this week you have me talking about Serving with Accountability.

For those of you who've not come across me before my name's Roger and I am the Bishop of Colchester. Normally when people find out that I'm the Bishop of Colchester they often say something like they didn't know that Colchester had a Bishop even though some historians say that there was a Bishop of Colchester (Bishop Adelphius of Camulodunum) at the Council of Arles in 314 nearly three centuries before Augustine came to Canterbury. But if I'm really honest - most people who find out I'm the Bishop of Colchester have no idea at all what a bishop is or what they do all day. I sometimes wonder if instead of saying I'm a bishop I should say that I am a senior partner in an organization with an annual turnover of around 1.4 billion pounds; that we have branches and personnel in almost every village, town and city across England; that we are involved in a number of areas from behavioural change consultancy to the hospitality industry and we have a large stake in the weddings industry and in the funeral business. We are heavily involved in education and we also manage a large property portfolio including the upkeep of nearly half (45%) of the nation's Grade I listed buildings.

Anyway, tonight I am to talk about serving accountably - or serving with accountability and I want to start by thinking about that word 'service'.

In keeping with my brother bishops I have brought along my box and the first thing that I shall pull out of here is a towel.

John's gospel tells us that at the last supper Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. Jesus - God in human form the King of all Creation, the one at whose name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord Jesus... washed his disciples' feet. This then speaks about an attitude of SERVICE.

I cannot help but marvel at the fact that the British Government has embraced the language of humility and service. The leader of the elected government is the Prime Minister, the first servant and he is aided in his post by the Civil Service. Caricatured - I'm sure unfairly by Sir Humphrey Appleby in the BBC comedy series Yes Minister Sir Humphrey once revealed how he viewed things: The Prime Minister - he said - gets his own car and driver, free air travel, a nice flat in central London, a house in the country, endless publicity, lots of banquets, a decent salary and a pension for life. And then - with a degree of self-interest - he added: It is unpardonable greed if he also wants to take over from the Civil Service the job of running the country...

Now I am sure that there are humble civil servants - like Bernard, and there are politicians who genuinely see their role as one of serving with humility but it is possibly not expected of them. A recent poll found that around half the people they asked believed politicians are 'out for themselves' and not their country. But what about us? What about Christians? Do

people expect us to have an attitude of service?

Pope John the twenty third was an extraordinary man whose election as pope came as a real surprise to him. In fact when he arrived in the Vatican for the conclave (the gathering where the new pope is elected) he turned up with a return train ticket to Venice. He just thought he'd be going home at the end of it. Pope John the twenty third often left the Vatican and all its security in order to visit ordinary people. He remained in Turkey, as a Bishop, in order to save a boatload of Jewish children from the Nazis. And he had a great sense of humour.

There was one occasion when Pope John the twenty third made a surprise visit to the Order of the Holy Spirit. He rang the bell at the gate and a flustered mother superior came running, "Oh, Holy Father" she said, "I am the Superior of the Holy Spirit!" And Pope John replied "I must say, my dear woman, that you are most fortunate. I am only the Vicar of Jesus Christ."

But perhaps the thing that is striking about someone like Pope John 23rd, or for that matter, the many humble women and men of Christ that we know. What is striking is that in their humility we glimpse something of Christ. We are called to make Christ visible to live; in such a way that the humility of Christ shines out of our lives. We are called to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus; to model ourselves on him. And so, when Saint Paul wrote to the church at Philippi he reminded them about the humility of Christ: Let the same mind be in you, he said that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.

Jesus did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, as something to be used for his own ends. Jesus was and is God. He was never less than God but this is about what it meant to be Jesus; it is about his vocation and Jesus knew that to be true to his calling he had to humble himself and be put to death - even death on a cross.

For God has not called us for our benefit. He has called us for the benefit of others. And that is true of all of us; licensed or unlicensed lay or ordained. God says to us (as Jesus said in John chapter 15), 'You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.' It is not my ministry to do with as I please But God's ministry into which we have been called. It's not about us but about God – and about those whom we serve. God has not called us for our benefit He has called us – each one of us for the benefit of others.

Knowing his vocation and being obedient to what he knew he had to do Jesus humbled himself. It says, He emptied himself. But of what did he empty himself? Not his divinity. Not his goodness. Jesus was and still is divine He was and still is God. But he emptied himself of significance. He emptied himself of a sense of importance. And that is what it means to humble yourself. It's not to do yourself down or to pretend that you are something other than you are. It is to know yourself, and yet – knowing who you are – you take the lower place and you let go of a sense of importance.

When Alcuin of York in the Eighth Century wrote in his instruction to Bishops: 'Let not the wealth of the world nor its dominion flatter thee into silence as to truth, nor king, nor judge, yea, nor thy dearest friend muzzle thy lips from righteousness' he was acutely aware of the seductions of this role. He knew how easily Bishops (and for that matter politicians and civil servants and all of us) can lose sight of that inner attitude of service and humility.

And so, do you know, I thank God daily for another Pope - Pope Francis - and as I seek to live out this role in humility and service I look to him with his 30 year old Renault 4 as his pope-mobile and he's an inspiration. When Pope Francis was elected he was asked to step up on a short pedestal to greet the crowds who'd gathered in St. Peter's Square. But he refused. He said, "I like it down here." He also asked the people gathered to say a prayer for him. This was unprecedented on such an occasion but he was saying - in essence I need your prayers - I need your help - your support.

Before he became pope, he was known as the "Bishop of the Slums" in Buenos Aires and he would wash the feet of the local teenagers and drink tea with the people who wandered the back alleys of Argentina's poor neighbourhoods. He said to his Bishops 'Let your style of service to your flock be that of humility; I would say even austerity and essentiality'. He talks of us being shepherds living with the odour of the sheep and that comes from being constantly close to people being in touch with them all the time.

He says: 'We need to constantly stir up God's grace and perceive it in every request, even those requests that are inconvenient and at times purely material or downright banal – but only apparently so.' That is what I mean by service and humility. Do you know I love the word humility because it shares a root with so many other words: human, humour and humility are all derived from a word that means ground or soil, what biologists call humus (not the Mediterranean chick pea dip but the stuff of the earth). So being human, being humble, having a large dose of a good sense of humour. It's all about being down to earth.

So - back to that other pope, Pope John 23. He said "It often happens that I wake up at night and begin to think about a serious problem and decide I must tell the Pope about it. Then I wake up completely and remember that I am the Pope." He also said "The feelings of my smallness and my nothingness always kept me good company."

Service mean - not so much doing menial tasks, for anyone who's been a teenager will know that you can do menial tasks without an inner attitude of humble service especially if that is what is required of you, but service is what goes on in us. It is - first and foremost - a heart thing. It's something about relinquishment, about personal abandonment. It's about giving ourselves completely to God, and I think it's about trusting God.

Following Jesus means keeping on submitting yourself to God's will, seeking his guidance sensing his prompting, and this is the bit that is hard sometimes, trusting that he's on the case. I remember some years ago listening to Jackie Pullinger speak (it was an extraordinary occasion) and one thing she said really stayed with me. It was all about the fact that God knows your personal situation; in my case, he knows I'm married and that I have two daughters. When God calls me to something it won't be impossible and it'll be ok because God is trustworthy.

Since I started training I've had just four posts; this is the fifth. And God has never let us down. God is faithful and our part is simply and humbly to trust him.

I remember a time, some eight years ago now when we got to the stage when I believed that it was possible, even likely that at some point in the year ahead, I and the family would be moving. So my wife and I on New Year's Eve, as the clocks struck midnight, prayed prayers of relinquishment. We began with the Methodist Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own but yours
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will; put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing: I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your
pleasure and disposal.'

And then, just to make doubly sure, we prayed the prayer of Charles de Foucauld:

Father, I abandon myself into your hands, Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all,
Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this O Lord. Amen.

Well – that was that, or at least so I thought, but actually it was just the beginning of a journey. For what I then came to realise is that although I had made myself subject to God's will there was still more to this process of relinquishment. For I found myself thinking: Well, I've done my bit, I've given God a free hand with my life, it's his turn now, now he has to make his will and purpose known. Except, he didn't. The skies fell silent, God said nothing and then I saw that true abandonment meant also relinquishing this demand upon God to speak. That it wasn't a transaction; 'I'll do what you want as long as you tell me what it is', it was simply an offering of myself: here I am – wholly available. And there was no requirement upon God to do anything.

What then followed surprised me. For this relinquishment, this radical obedience began to feel a lot like love. I would continually offer myself to God and in that self-offering I would discover new depths to my trusting; and new insights into God's faithfulness. And all the time there was this growing feeling of being in love with God, for love and self-sacrifice and humble service amount to very much the same thing - an attitude of loving, sacrificial humble service.

Anyway, that's the towel. The next thing in here is my service book because another way we use the term service is when we talk of servicing our car or it needing to go in for a service. That has something to do with checking that everything's working and with topping things up, sorting out the bits that are worn and getting it back on the road in a good, fit and safe condition. And I think a life of service involves an element of these things

A couple of weeks ago I was on an aeroplane and, no matter how many times I've heard it, I always pay attention to the safety briefing that we get from the cabin crew... but there's one bit that always jars. In the event of a loss in cabin pressure, they say, yellow oxygen masks will drop down from the ceiling compartment located above you.....and then they add 'Please make sure to secure your own mask before helping others'. Now - I don't know if I could do that because my gut instinct would be to help them first especially if it's my daughter, or my wife. But I also know that I would be no good to them whatsoever if I was asphyxiating because I hadn't secured my own mask before helping them.

And the same is true about the Church and about whatever ministry it is that we exercise. We would be no good whatsoever, to anyone, if we are spiritually asphyxiating. So checking

that everything's working, and with topping things up and sorting out the bits that are worn and getting it back on the road in a good, fit and safe condition is a good thing for us to be doing not because we are putting ourselves first, or like the L'Oréal ad because we're worth it (although you are), but no - we do it because we'd be of no service to others if we didn't take some care of ourselves.

So there's our inner attitude of service and then there's our need for a, I don't know, 10,000 mile service (some of you don't look as though you've been on the road that long or maybe you've just been driven very gently). But another way we use the word service is to describe what we do in church. Here's another type of service book and although this has something to do with offering ourselves to God and it has something to do with keeping ourselves topped up and spiritually healthy, there's more besides. Because it is what we do in our worship that actually defines us, and makes us who we are. It is in worship that the Church is established and sustained. It is in worship that the word, the good news, culminating in the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, is proclaimed and received. The Church is grounded in the word of God, preached, believed and obeyed.

It is in worship that we feed on Jesus and are nourished by him; it is in worship that we join the angels and archangels and all the saints in heaven in praising God's eternal holiness. And as we worship, there is wholeness, shalom, peace, as all the fragmented bits of our being are put into God's perspective. And as we worship, we are changed... we are formed... we find our identity.

So, when we talk of serving with accountability that little word service is about our inner attitude of humility (towel) it is about how we maintain and look after our interior life (car service book) and it is about our corporate life of worship (church service book).

Just turn to the person next to you and ask them what service means to them and what are good examples of that service, whether it's serving with humility or looking after our interior life or about what we do when we come together for worship.

I hope that was a fruitful discussion. It's amazing how freighted, how loaded how full of meaning, a word like serving or service actually is.

I was taken back just then to when I was a student. (When I went to university it was to study chemistry, not theology, although it did make me holey in that all the chemicals and acids and stuff used to burn holes in all my clothes so that I often looked as if I'd been attacked by a legion of moths.) We weren't the most sartorially elegant students but, because I was at Imperial College in London, we did live in a very salubrious location with Harrods just down the road. Anyway, one day, when I came out of the lab I saw that a local clothing store was having a sale; so I popped in to have a look (I'm one of those people who would rather search out a quality item at half price than spend the same amount on an inferior product at full price). Anyway, I was looking at the sale rack when the assistant came over to me. "Can I help you sir?" he said, which I thought was nice, but I said "no, it's ok, I'm just looking". "Well" he said "I don't think we have anything in this shop for you" and he showed me to the door. It was a bit like that bit in *Pretty Woman* with Julia Roberts; only I didn't quite have enough money to go on a shopping spree in Knightsbridge and then return to the shop - wave my carrier bags - and say "Remember me? Big mistake, big, big mistake".

But that lack of good service does make me think, when have I prejudged someone unfairly? When have I allowed my unconscious bias to throw my judgement or cause me to overlook

someone? It's quite sobering and it just goes to show how much we can be challenged just by reflecting on what service or serving means.

So to serving with accountability. I prefer that to serving accountably not least because the word 'with' is one of the most important words in the Christian faith. All this is not merely about God being for us or God working for us. We as Christians believe something about God working with us and, really crucially, about God being with us. The best of all is, as John Wesley said that God is WITH us. 'With' is about relationships, and so, for that matter, is the word 'accountability'.

Serving WITH ACCOUNTABILITY is not about devising some new yardstick with which we can beat other people; it is not about coming up with the Church's version of OFSTED; it is about our relationships with each other; it is about mutuality; it is about what we give and what we receive; it's about what we contribute and what part we play in the wider life of the Church and, yes, that will involve asking questions of each other as, together, we seek to be the Church that God is calling us to be. It will mean regular self-evaluation holding ourselves accountable to God and to each other. It will have something to do with our financial responsibility towards each other and the extent of the generosity that we show and it will have something to do with what a church and what ministers within the church are called to be and to do.

The Archdeacons have already made a start on this with their Articles of Enquiry, not because they like bombarding you with questions but principally to nurture and encourage a culture in which it is normal to audit our activity; to examine our effectiveness and to prayerfully seek ways in which we can more fruitfully be the church that God is calling us to be. And to say things like 'we found this worked really well' 'we struggled a bit with this' 'we need some help in this area'. I believe that God always gives to the church the wider church the resources it needs but we need to work at how we use, and how we share, those resources and all that starts with relationships.

When Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth this is what he said:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12 - from verse 12

You are the body of Christ – manikin. Well... who is Paul writing to? In the opening of the letter it says, 'To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,' and then he adds, 'together with all those who in every place call

on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.’ Paul is writing to the church in Corinth and to everyone else who calls upon the name of Jesus and he says to us all ‘You are the body of Christ’. This is what defines us as church. We are not the Jesus of Nazareth Memorial Society meeting together to remember a man who once was alive. We are a body in which the living God is pleased to dwell. It’s not that the Lord was here. It’s that the Lord IS here. His Spirit is with us and in us.

I remember one Sunday off I had back in Worcestershire when I had the rare privilege of going to a service that my wife was taking. She was licensed to a small group of villages just North East of Worcester and I did what I rarely get the chance to do - I listened to the conversations in the pews. I don’t know how many there will be this morning, said one parishioner; Joan and David are away, Peter has been taken into hospital, I spoke to him yesterday, how are you, would you like a lift home afterwards... and so it went on. This was a group of people who loved each other and cared for each other and it really struck me that when we use the word fellowship it feels such a limp and inadequate word conjuring up thoughts of weak coffee and six week old biscuits.

But fellowship is how we describe what it means, the mechanics if you like, of being the body of Christ. The Bible uses a particular word for fellowship, the word is koinonia. It means fellowship, partnership, sharing belonging, participation, and communion. It is used by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles to describe the common life shared by the early Church. These early Christians, we are told, devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship (koinonia), to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common (in koinonia); they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. That is a picture of koinonia and maybe, maybe the church is being called to rediscover the richness of that koinonia; to explore new levels of human relatedness, and to be more fully a body in which God – by his Spirit – may dwell.

Part of that may be to think again about what it means to be a member. The word member derives from the Latin word membrum which means a limb or part of the body and it is a very strong word. It’s more than paying a subscription fee or aligning our views with those of others. It is about being physically attached to one another and physically part of one another. Paul says in I Corinthians 12: If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Or in Romans 12: Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, Live in harmony with one another.

Steven Croft, the Bishop of Sheffield, in his book ‘Transforming Communities’ says this: ‘It is a way of belonging which is part of the gift, grace and responsibility of being part of God’s church. It is also a way of belonging which needs to be nurtured by patterns of association and fellowship within the community.’ This kind of belonging, he says, therefore calls again for patterns of close association between Christians, knowledge of one another and genuine Christian fellowship. We are not a body if we are just a collection of parts without the nerves and sinews and muscles and flesh that bind us together and give us life. It takes intentional and positive action to enable the body of Christ to BE the BODY of Christ.

Why? Because I think, in part, we have to undo some of what has happened to us as a Church. If we go back to the enlightenment, that is that period in our history stretching from the middle of the 17th century and all through the eighteenth century, it was a period in which huge changes took place in science, philosophy, society and politics. During that time religion lost something of its place within the public arena and faith became a private matter for individuals. So Church became an awkward place where people practised in public something that belonged in the private sphere. So our faith became a bit like our underwear - we are kind of glad that we have it but we're not going to go around talking about it and we're certainly not going to make a great show of it or share it with anyone else.

Churches became gatherings of people maintaining either an embarrassed silence or a kind of church going persona, a Sunday best. Now I believe that this kind of behaviour is a thing of the past but it does mean that if we are to change the culture of the church and grow together as the body of Christ then it will need intentional and positive action and a huge amount of grace.

After telling the church at Corinth that they are the body of Christ, that we are the body of Christ, stuff happened and he wrote to them again drawing out some of the implications of what it means to be the body of Christ and what it means to serve with accountability.

He says in 2 Corinthians 8: We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. See how, already, he is giving them a vision of the body of Christ that is more than just their own local church.

He goes on: For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

Paul is trying to make sure that by the time he arrives in Corinth the church will have put aside the full amount of money that makes up their contribution to the impoverished church in Jerusalem. In his first letter, he said: On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. Of course, something unexplained and terrible has happened since that first letter.

Paul writes out of a sense of pain as he confronts issues of sorrow and hurt. But he's not going to shy away from the issue of Christian giving because it is too important to be simply brushed aside. So he holds up for them the example of the Macedonian Churches who were themselves poor but gave beyond their means in order to support the work of God in Jerusalem and beyond. And he writes on the themes of grace of love and of the interdependence that exists within the body of Christ, the family of the church. So what does he say about grace? Interestingly, a lot more than might first appear to be the case

The Greek word for grace, *charis* occurs five times in the passage we heard:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace [CHARIS] of God
2their abundant joy and their extreme poverty
have overflowed in a wealth of generosity [CHARIS]
3For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according
to their means, and even beyond their means,
4begging us earnestly for the privilege [CHARIS]
of sharing in this ministry to the saints
6so that we might urge Titus that,
as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete
this generous undertaking [CHARIS] among you.
7so we want you to excel also
in this generous undertaking. [CHARIS]

Now that word, charis, could be something beautiful, an act of generosity, or it could be the gratitude evoked by these things.

In English we have a whole host of words that we use in place of the one word charis: grace, graceful, gracefulness, grace, graciousness, grateful, gratitude. All of it, in a sense, is about grace; grace in the giving and grace in the receiving

Now I was probably quite a strict parent and I never believed in hitting my children so we had a system, when they were little, of yellow and red cards just like in football. If one of my daughters got a red card then she may have been sent to her room or something similar but she would also be given a ban. Either a TV ban or a sweetie ban. Once I was in the supermarket with my two daughters who, at the time, were both on a sweetie ban. I was feeling kind and so I bought them both some sweets; I explained that they were still on their ban and that they didn't really deserve any sweets but that this was an act of grace. Amazingly they understood and a couple of days later my older daughter asked me 'Dad... can you grace us again?' 'Can you grace us?' There is grace in the giving and also grace in the receiving.

The Greek for 'thank you' is 'charin oida' which means literally 'I am aware of grace'. Grace, gratitude, is part of the Christian life and it's a discipline. Sometimes we need to work at being grateful.

So there is grace and there is love. The Corinthian church were not good at loving or at least, not the right kind of loving. They were divided among themselves. Some thought they were better than others. They were taking each other to court and when they met for meals some remained hungry while others gorged themselves and got themselves drunk. This was not a loving community of faith so Paul wrote to them about love and he said: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* Love is kind, generous, giving Kindness, generosity is part of what it means to love

Paul said: Now as you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. See how that resonates with what he said about love. You, that is the Corinthians, excel in everything: in faith, in speech, in knowledge. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, if I excel in speech, if I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, if I excel in knowledge but have not love... I am nothing. So excel also in this generous undertaking. Be generous, gracious and be loving

But note this is about giving: giving is about relinquishing something, it is about giving something up, surrendering it to someone else. It is not the same as paying. When we pay for something we have some control as to what we get out of it. As the purchaser I am in control, I get what I pay for and I pay for what I get. Now I say this because I hear a lot of churches talk about 'paying the parish share'. It's said as if the parish share is a tax, like a contractual payment and it has nothing whatsoever to do with giving.

When we give, and when we love, we relinquish control. We do not insist on our own way. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:7: Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. The word Paul uses is 'hilaros' so God loves a hilarious giver. Not merely a good-natured giver, but a hilarious giver. A giver who's giving bursts over in enthusiastic, laughing aloud, giddy joy. Giving that can't wait to share. Giving that overflows in happiness for the blessings received by others.

Sometimes I wince at the solemnity with which the collection plate is passed round in churches. It is such a contrast to some African churches I've been to where baskets are placed near the altar and members of the congregation dance down the aisle and make place their offering in the basket. For them, giving is a joy...they give hilariously and so should we. This is giving with a sense of lavish abandonment. When I give I'm not paying a bill, I'm not buying my subscription, I'm not handing over my taxes. When I give I'm making a praise offering to God. It's part of my worship. Freely I have received, so freely, joyfully, I give. For God loves a cheerful giver.

And then, back to that sense of serving with accountability, that sense of interdependence within the family of the church. A few verses on from the passage that we looked at in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul quotes from Exodus 16:18 about the manna that fell in the desert: 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.' It is part of God's generous provision that those who have little and those who have plenty both have sufficient. And it is part of God's plan that those who have plenty share their plenty with those who have little so that there is a balance between the abundance of one and the need of the other. We are the body of Christ we belong to each other we need each other. Or as JB Priestly says in 'An Inspector Calls': 'We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.'

Your generosity can make possible the work of God in other parts of the diocese... in isolated rural villages, in deprived urban areas, amongst some of the poorest people of our nation. You can make possible so much that communicates God's love to people, that transforms communities and changes peoples' lives. What you have the potential to give, over and above what you get back in terms of services and support, can flow out to other parts of the diocese making possible that which would otherwise not happen but for your generosity. As historic investments no longer stretch to pay for the needs of the current church, so increasingly the full cost of ministry is being passed on to the parishes but the danger is that churches will seek to pay only for what they receive or will demand what they believe they have paid for.

We need to nourish and encourage this sense of interdependence, this sense of family, of being THE BODY OF CHRIST and so halt this retreat into congregationalism which can so easily become a kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest. I'm taken back when I think of this to the comedy series Bread about a family in Liverpool. They would meet and eat around the kitchen table and on pay day they would all put their contributions into a common pot or jug (it was a big china hen). Some could afford to put a lot in while others struggled to

pay anything, but each gave as they could and then that pot paid for all their needs regardless of how much or how little each had contributed relative to the other.

You are the Body of Christ in this place, in this diocese. You belong to something bigger than yourselves and part of that belonging is to do with supporting one another by prayer, by encouragement and by the sharing of resources. And it is a privilege too, a grace, to share in this ministry to the saints - grace, in the giving and in the receiving. Love, made manifest in kindness and generosity, for God loves a cheerful giver; and a sense of mutuality of being part of the family of the church, of serving with accountability.

But, you know ultimately this brings us back to service and the giving of ourselves. In 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 14 Paul says this: 'It's not your gifts I want... No, he adds 'what I want is you'. Ultimately, I believe that is what God is saying to us that it's not just about your gifts, what you have and what you're willing to relinquish, it's not your gifts that God wants...it's you- your heart to love him; your soul to praise him; your mind to think on him and your strength to serve him. Give gifts, give graciously, give generously please but most of all give yourself to God, abandon yourself to him, love him, praise him, think on him and serve him.

Serving with accountability is about giving yourself to, and living within, the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.

The peace of the Lord be always with you All, and also with you. Let us offer one another a sign of peace.