

Sermon Cast your bread upon the waters 12.10.14
Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 2 Corinthians 9:6-11
United Reformed Church, Highgate Julian Templeton

“Cast you bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.” Eccl. 11:1

How do you decide how best to invest your time, energy, and money? We often have varying proportions of these three resources depending on our stage of life. Children have lots of time and energy but no money. The young have energy but often little discretionary time and money. The old may have money and time to spare, but little energy.

God has created us as finite creatures on a finite earth with finite resources. How we decide to use those resources is the question of stewardship, the question of how we best steward or manage the resources that God has given us. On first hearing, the author of Ecclesiastes would seem to be little help in this matter.

Cast you bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.

In what circumstance might throwing your basic food staple into the water ever be considered a responsible act of stewardship? Surely this is an act of utter recklessness? Surely only the waterfowl would be the beneficiaries of this act of largesse? Well, it depends.

It depends whether your bread has any whole grains in it. It depends whether the water on which you are casting the bread has come from the first heavy rain that has fallen after a long hot summer and has pooled on the thirsty earth. It depends whether you have prepared that ground on which the rain has just fallen to make it ready for planting. It depends whether this is spare bread that would otherwise go mouldy if you attempted to store it. Spare wholegrain bread, cast onto prepared earth, on which the first rain has fallen, pooling and sinking into the earth, may in a matter of months sprout and grow and produce more grain for more bread.

It may do so. But equally, it may not. It all depends on the conditions. Growing up on a farm, I became aware from an early age that the weather was not merely a topic of conversation when you could not think of anything else to say, or a mere inconvenience if you were going out; rather, the weather was your livelihood. Your crops and your animals may alternately thrive or fail to thrive depending on the climatic conditions. And therefore sowing, or putting out the rams and the bulls, was, to a great extent an act of faith. You learned to work *with* the weather, because you soon learned you could not work against it!

The writer of Ecclesiastes, in Hebrew the *Kohelet* or teacher says: ‘Cast your bread on the waters.’ In other

words, 'Try it and trust God', because, as he says more than once: "You do not know what will happen."

Try it and trust God.

Sometimes we try things, but don't always trust God. Other times, we trust God, but we don't try things. But when we try things and trust God, then, sometimes, in the providence of God, things prosper.

Countless Christians have trusted God and started telling others the good news about Jesus, and new churches have been planted and have grown.

Out of a suggestion in Church Meeting in this Church that we should find a way of telling children bible stories came *Pathway*, which reaches thousands of children every year in North London with stories from the bible.

I remember Gwyneth Wilson having the idea of starting a weekly Christian Meditation group: and Christa Keeler who had the idea of starting a weekly evening bible study group. But this was when we were still struggling to get a medium-sized Sunday congregation. At the time I was not at all confident that if we started these groups we would be able to sustain them. And yet because these people tried it and trusted God, God caused their ventures to prosper. The Meditation Group has an average weekly attendance of 12, and the Home Group of 8, and both seem still to be growing.

Of course, there were other ventures we began and that failed; there were yet others that flourished for a season and then fell away. Kohelet's point is that, in advance, you cannot predict which will succeed: "you do not know which will prosper, this or that," (Eccl. 11:6) which is the nature of life for time-bound creatures. Yet for that very reason: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days." Try it and trust God.

Or as Paul writes: "the one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, but the one who sows generously will reap generously." 2 Cor. 9:6

And what we need to sow is prayer, passion, commitment, energy, and time. What I think both the Meditation Group and the Home Group have shown us is that when an individual, supported initially by just a few others, invests her or his time and energy in starting a new group and if that group meets regularly (usually weekly) then God may cause that group to prosper by drawing new people joining it. I note that what both the Meditation Group and Home Group have in common is *continuity of leadership*. Usually, Gwyneth or Roger Orme has led, or been present, every week.

Continuity of leadership in Sunday morning worship is something that the URC, by the way it deploys its Stipendiary Ministers, makes, if not impossible, then very difficult. We Stipendiary Ministers who serve more

than one church could, if those churches changed their time of worship, provide continuity of worship leadership, but by having to rush-off in haste after the early service to the later service elsewhere, what we often cannot do is provide continuity of pastoral contact. I know this from a previous ministry, where I led two services every Sunday morning, one in Iver and one in Slough. I had, at most, 10 minutes after the early service to speak to people. Actually, because of the pressure of having soon to depart to lead another service, I found I was not in the right frame-of-mind to listen to people properly.

Both Gwyneth and Roger would, I think, agree that it is the contact and conversations that they have with attenders of their groups before and after their meetings that is, for some, nearly as important as the meeting itself. The personal contact with the leader or facilitator builds a sense of each person's worth, as well as group cohesiveness and loyalty.

This is why the proposal of the Elders' Meeting and Church Meeting to seek to find a way of having a full-time Stipendiary Minister for this church has my full support. It is a way of casting our bread upon the waters, of sowing generously in leadership provision. What strikes me, and probably many of you also, as being incongruous is that a United Reformed Church such as ours could employ a fulltime Stipendiary

Minister locally of any other denomination except the United Reformed Church!

The URC has adopted a deployment policy dictated by a mathematical formula of fairness. It attempts to divide the number of Stipendiary Ministers (just under 500) with the number churches (just under 1500) by a system called 'scoping'. Even with my limited arithmetic I can work out that that means one minister for every three churches. But if you ask the churches about what they can achieve with a third of a minister; and even more so when you ask the ministers about what they can achieve with a third of their time in a church, they will tell you that it is an unsatisfactory arrangement. The justification given (or it is trying to make a virtue out of a necessity?) is that Stipendiary Ministers are only one of a team of Elders, Lay Preachers, and others who together deliver ministry across a group of churches. But such justification cannot get away from the fact that—because our declining membership has not been matched by a proportionate closing of churches—we are trying to share out stipendiary ministry across a large number of smaller churches. Elders, Lay Preachers and others can and do provide essential and appreciated ministry to a church, but stipendiary ministry is a distinctive gift to a church of: 1. Time. 2. Vocation. The stipend is a living allowance that means stipendiary ministers don't have to find other work in order to live but can give their time to leading people in the worship of God, to pastoral

care, and to mission. Stipendiary ministers have a particular vocation to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and pastor the people. Of course, in our tradition others can do any of these things, but only stipendiary ministers have the time and vocation to *integrate* them. That is, they have the time and vocation to *connect* all of these aspects in one ministry. Having said this, stipendiary ministers are not indispensable. I was reminded of this when I returned recently to ministry after four months of sabbatical and holiday to discover the church had grown in my absence! It is *God's action* that is indispensable, as the Apostle Paul reminds us: one plants, another waters, but it is God who gives the growth. (See 1 Cor. 3:6)

The question with which we are grappling as a local church with significant income is how we best deploy our income so that there is more leadership time through which God can work?

There are a number of parables that Jesus told about what the Kingdom of God is like that strongly suggest if we don't put our money to work we are not being good stewards and we may even be disobeying God. I'm thinking especially of the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30); the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt. 13:31-32) and the Parable of the Sower (Lk. 8:4-15). These parables stand in stark contrast to the URC's policy of attempting to share resources according to a

mathematical formula of fairness. The parables mentioned all strongly suggest that if you don't do anything with what God gives you, you will forfeit the little you have; but if you do something with what God gives you, you will prosper and grow.

Through the foresight and hard work of Christians who went before us, we as a church have property from which we earn income. We can therefore afford to maintain our buildings and be generous by helping those who have little. But if we are to be good stewards what we cannot afford to do is weaken the church by accepting imposed limitations on our ministry. Let us cast our bread upon the waters; let us do something with what God has given us; let us try it and trust God.