

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday November 11th 2007 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Making a Difference – Me!”**

The sermon today is the last of three sermons about discipleship and money; three sermons in our 2008 Stewardship Campaign which has, as its theme, “Making a Difference”.

Two weeks ago I spoke of how God can make a difference in our lives, in our giving... perhaps you remember that wonderful prayer, “Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope and charity and that we may obtain what you promise, make us to love what you command...”.

Last week, I spoke of the way in which God is ever working to “knit us together in one communion and fellowship”... that being part of this faith community, seeking to be in mission and in obedience to God, carries responsibilities and one of those responsibilities is to give to God our money... as well as of our time and talents.

Today, “Making a Difference... I must make a difference”.

Luke 20, verse 27 “Some Sadducees who do not believe in the Resurrection, came to Jesus”.

The Sadducees were not a long-lived group but while in existence they were one of the three main Jewish political and religious movements (the other two being the Pharisees and the Essenes). The Sadducees were rather elite, sophisticated, urbane and considered themselves rather set apart (or better set above) others. They attracted wealthy supporters and felt comfortable in the more refined strata of society.

But despite their social status, despite their familiarity with holy things, they were really only two-dimensional. They refused to believe, or they could not believe, in the resurrection and so did not live their lives in the light of rebirth, resurrection, eternity.

At some point in the spiritual journey, perhaps often at many points, the disciple of Jesus makes a quantum leap as he/she responds to and views stewardship campaign. In the early days of discipleship a stewardship campaign is seen only as fundraising...

the primary goal is to reach a target but then, by the grace and act of God, something radically changes. The pledge card, a promise of financial commitment to the work of God in this place, the pledge card a deliberate commitment to God and a tangible expression of thanks, faith, obedience and participation.

Many years ago I heard a preacher ask this question, "If you were convicted of being a Christian today, would there be enough evidence to convict you?". Our calendars honestly show our commitment to Christ (or, at best, a growing commitment to Christ) and so should our cheque books and bank statements. "If you were convicted of being a Christian today, would there be enough evidence to convict you?".

The prophet Haggai speaks to a people at their wits' end, tempted to despair, almost without hope. Like the Sadducees it seems, all they can see is what literally lies before their eyes. Looking at the Temple in ruins the prophet asks them, "Is it not in your sight as nothing?".

And three times within as many verses, the prophet urges the people to "Take Courage". You may remember the story of my Norwegian friend who visited England many years ago. Walking around London, she was deeply impressed by the number of large signs that read "Take Courage"... I didn't have the heart to tell her that "Courage" was English beer not a Biblical quotation!

How can we, how can I, how can you move to a place where we give to God's work generously, proportionately and sacrificially? A place where we know that "I am making a difference" to others and to me?

Well, the prophet Haggai shares three wonderful truths with the people of God that he believes will renew their hope, their lives and their giving.

First promise... "I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made when you came out of Egypt". "I am with you"... the Lord promises to be our constant companion.

Second promise... "My spirit abides in you". The Spirit of God, the energy of God, is given abundantly to us so that we might be bold, confident, generous in our giving and in our serving. We cannot do it alone... we need not to it alone... we are not called to do it alone.

And the third promise... "Do not fear". The Lord comes as a mighty warrior to rescue us from fear and from the paralysis and isolation which fear invokes and feeds.

At the second of yesterday's weddings, the bride and groom chose the hymn "Great is Thy faithfulness"... a hymn not in our Episcopal hymnal but one I first heard at a Billy Graham Crusade in London in 1966. By some miracle of grace, I found within a few minutes the songbook from the rally. There I gave my life to Christ... for over forty years God has been ever faithful, ever present, ever constant, ever good... though I have been faithless. Ultimately it is that awareness, that knowledge and that experience which gives me courage to attempt to be bold in giving to God.

There will be some who have struggled over these pledge cards, I hope there are some who have struggled (we have!)...we wish to aspire to generosity, we wish to offer to God a profound expression of thanks and praise but we fear... can we manage to do this? Is God faithful to care for us? To us the Lord simply says, "Do not fear".

And this was the promise that was offered to the people of God... "I will fill this house with splendour... and the latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former".

Let it be our vision for this house to be filled with the splendour of God as we develop our ministry and our mission to the world; and let it be our commitment to "make a difference" by how and what we give of our money and of ourselves.

And so, as Paul once prayed for the Thessalonians, let us pray for one another, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and in every good word".

AMEN

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