

Sunday 19 March 2006: Lent 2006 6.30pm Sermon Series: Building Community

Giving and Receiving in Community

Readings: Extract from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran; Luke 6. 32-38

When you open a telephone or online account these days, they often ask you for a 'favourite word', a password that you will easily remember. It says something about me that the word that I usually give is 'community'. And it's not entirely surprising. Most of my professional life has been spent in and around the world of community development. And a fair bit of my personal life has been spent in various kinds of volunteering and community activity, both in secular and faith-based contexts. What I hope to do in these few minutes is to reflect a little on what I have learnt about the nature of community, and particularly about the part that giving and receiving play in building community.

I am not going to spend time defining 'community'. Suffice it to say that, at its most basic, a community is a group of people who share something in common, be that the neighbourhood they live in, a common interest, a common origin or identity, a faith.

I want to start by describing in a particular way the journey that my professional life has taken - not because there is anything special about it, but because it illustrates what I want to say, and particularly the transition in my own thinking about giving and receiving in community. I was brought up in a vicarage, in Bournemouth of all places, where self-sacrificial service was the overriding ethos, especially epitomised by my mother. When I went to university, I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I did want it to be 'useful'. When I left Cambridge, I did not know what to do, so I thought doing something useful abroad would be a good idea. I simply assumed I had something useful to give, to somewhere - as it turned out, that somewhere was Afghanistan. I worked as a so-called 'volunteer', in the office of the United Nations Development Programme. I was surrounded by experts from around the world giving their skills and experience to help in the development of Afghanistan. To this point, I think it is fair to say that my concept of Christian service, and the part it played in building a better world, was based on an altruistic 'I am helping you, I am giving service to you' ideal.

My first job back at home continued in this tradition. Bede House in Bermondsey is a settlement, one of a number of voluntary organisations around the country which sprung from a strong tradition of Victorian philanthropy - the well-off, fortunate, often Christian middle classes giving their time, their energy, their money to help the poor and the disadvantaged in the inner city. Of course much had changed by the 1970s, but there was still a strong sense that 'we' were helping 'them', and we struggled to encourage local people to become involved in the running, the ownership of the organisation.

So there was quite a contrast when I moved on in the late eighties to an organisation called Community Matters, where I spent the next major chunk of my working life. For here I found something very different. Community Matters is the national network of community associations. These are organisations formed by local people in their own neighbourhoods, often to obtain and run a community centre for themselves and their neighbours. Here the emphasis was on self-help and mutuality, on people giving their energy to support and develop activities that they and their neighbours could benefit from. While I was astounded at the effort and time

many people gave to their local community association, I could see that, crucially, it was their organisation, they were doing it for the benefit of themselves and their neighbours, for the benefit of their community.

Thirteen years with Community Matters brought home to me the realisation that giving should not be and is not a one-way process. About this time, I came across another type of organisation which illustrates this reality very clearly – the Time Bank. The concept is very simple. Once you join a Time Bank, you are encouraged to offer your time, as a volunteer, to help others in the time bank. For every hour's voluntary work, you get an hour's credit, which you can then redeem from another member of the time bank. So you might do the shopping for a housebound elderly person, and claim an hour's babysitting from a youngster, who could then get some DIY done by another member – and so on. The crucial point is that everyone's time is valued equally, and it is explicitly recognised that everyone has something to contribute.

When Jo and I had young children, we belonged to a babysitting circle. Same concept, just more limited in scope. What is clear, looking back, is that the giving and receiving on which that circle was founded cemented relationships between its members, relationships which have remained strong ever since. This is a point I will return to.

To complete my professional life story (so far anyway), since 2000, I have been working in the Home Office on community policy. I work with civil servants across Government, with local authorities, and with voluntary and community organisations, to promote a new political culture, which is just beginning to reverse the serious level of political disengagement and the enormous power inequalities that we see around us. Our campaign is based on a recognition that the way to build a better society is for the state, at all levels, and the people, the citizens to work together to solve problems and develop policies and services that best address people's needs. Hence our slogan is 'Together We Can', and if all goes well, you might come across it here and there in the future, though I don't think it will rival slogans like 'Make Poverty History' as a household phrase! Of course the way I describe it makes it sound easy, and we all know achieving such a major cultural shift is much more challenging. What this work has brought home to me particularly is that, if we are to build a better community, a better society, then we must each respect the contribution that all can make to achieve that goal.

So I hope you can see how I have come to see my early assumption about the nature of Christian service, and my duty as a citizen (though I didn't use that language then), as simplistic and even potentially damaging. Altruistic giving is not all that is needed to build a better society - indeed, I would dare to say we are kidding ourselves if we think it is. We can apply what I have been saying to the particular activity we call volunteering. I used to think it was essentially an altruistic activity. There is still a prevailing culture which makes that assumption, although I think there has been a perceptible shift over recent years.

Of course one motivation for volunteering is to help others. But another is what we get from it as the volunteer – for some people, that might be work experience or a new skill, it might be pursuing a hobby or interest we enjoy, it might be to make new friends, it might be recognition and kudos, and a place in the local establishment. And a third motivation is that volunteering is a way we as individuals and with others can work for the common good, that is for a future that is better both for ourselves, and for our friends and neighbours. Campaigning and pressure group activity often falls into that category.

I hope you can see a theme beginning to emerge. Giving and receiving are two sides of the same coin. Giving is not a one-sided process. We are all givers and receivers (as the Prophet says in the reading), and the sooner we recognise it the better. Ultimately giving and receiving are about

relationship. And relationships are the building blocks, the stones that build communities. In very broad terms, the more relationships there are, the stronger the community. For what it's worth, some sociologists give this stock of relationships and networks a name - they call it 'social capital'.

But just having this strong social capital is not enough. If we want to build healthy communities, there are two aspects of this giving-receiving relationship that it is particularly important to get right, which I hope what I have already said points towards. The first one concerns 'power', and the second 'purpose'.

Giving can put the giver in a powerful position. Think of colonialism, in its paternalistic rather than its exploitative mode. Think of the stereotypical image of 'Lady Bountiful'. Think too of the Welfare State, with all its good intentions to care for people from cradle to grave. We now know that too often such giving, intentionally or more often unintentionally, creates dependencies which sap people's sense of responsibility or self-worth, and foster a sense of powerlessness. I am convinced that this is an important malaise in Britain today.

But it doesn't have to be like that. As the Prophet says: 'And there are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they seek joy, nor give with mindfulness of virtue; They give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space.'

Interestingly it is Paul who, in Acts, reports Jesus as saying 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'. On the other hand, Jesus himself in our Gospel reading from Luke, said: Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.' Indeed, if we think about Jesus' behaviour as reported in the Gospels, we don't find such a one-sided emphasis on the virtue of giving either. Think of his call to Zacchaeus up the sycamore tree - 'Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today'. What about his readiness to have his feet smothered in expensive ointment by the woman with the alabaster jar? Again, how often did he say 'Your faith has made you whole', rather than 'I (or my Father) has healed you.' Again, when Jesus was washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, he said to Peter, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me'. So being the recipient of service was as important as the giving of the service. And of course there is Martha and Mary, both recognised by Jesus as making an equally valid response, the one busying herself in giving service, the other in listening and receiving. So giving and receiving are both important, both have their part to play, as well as being two sides of the same coin.

The other aspect I want to focus on is purpose. The secular definition of community development places it very firmly in a context of positive values. It identifies the core values of social justice and equality, democratic participation and self-determination, co-operation and interdependence as central to the process. And it describes the purpose as building relationships, so as to enable people to play a fuller part together in creating a better society which is based on those core values. This gives an external focus to the building of community, it gives the process a purpose beyond itself. In Christian language, we might talk about building the kingdom of God here on earth – different language but very similar in practice in many ways. We want to make the world around us a place that better reflects the nature of God, that better reflects his loving relationship with us. Is it not this explicit role for love that distinguishes Christian community-building? God gives us, everyone of us his children, his love, as 'the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space'. Our response must surely be to love God in return, and to follow God's example by giving of ourselves in love for our neighbour, and receiving graciously what others give to us, in order to make this world a little more God-like.

So let us recognise giving and receiving for what they are – two sides of the same coin. Let our giving and our receiving rest lightly on us, accepting that it is ‘life that gives unto life, while we are but a witness.’ Let us value giving and receiving as the making of relationships, and therefore as the building blocks of community. Let us seek out the contribution that others can make, and value and respect it. And let us acknowledge that we all must work together, giving and receiving, to build community for a purpose, the building of the kingdom of God here on earth.