

2 Corinthians 8:1-7

I often wonder what motivates people to do what they do.

Take Vin Cox who in July 2010 set a new round the world cycle record – why would you do that?

Then there was the Suicide bomber who on Thursday rammed his explosive-packed vehicle into a barrier outside a police building in a central Iraq city this morning, killing 20 police officers and wounding dozens more. What motivates such people?

One could go on and wonder about those who raise huge sums of money for various charities, those who camped out in London for days before the royal wedding, or even those who drive from Basingstoke to Kettering to watch football!

What is it that motivates such people? What causes people to step outside the norm?

In this passage we have today from 2 Corinthians we have a tale of two churches.

Paul was writing to the church in Corinth. Paul had a difficult relationship with these Christians and wrote a number of letters about his concerns of which we have these two. Among the problems which Paul dealt with in this second letter was the fact that, having begun a collection for the church in Jerusalem which was struggling, the Corinthian church had now stopped this. So in Chapters 8&9 Paul writes to encourage them to continue and complete their offering for the people of God in Jerusalem. Over the next three weeks as we think about Giving in Grace we are going to look at three parts of these two chapters and see what Paul had to say to the Christians in Corinth all those centuries ago and what it might say to us today.

The very first thing he does is tell them what was happening around him in the churches of Macedonia, that is the churches of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, the second of our two groups of churches today. Paul was writing this from somewhere in Macedonia, which is modern day northern Greece, to Corinth in the south of Greece and he wants them to know, v1, what was going on in the Macedonian churches because it was so unusual.

The giving of these churches had amazed Paul. Just look with me at some of what he said about their giving.

1. They were generous v2b&3

Paul spoke about their rich generosity. Have a look at the end of v2 and into v3, “welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.”

The mark of their giving was generosity. But what motivated them to give in this way? Presumably Paul had explained to them about the situation in Jerusalem and they had understood that and as we see in v4 wanted to share in “this service to the saints”. Seeing the need had resulted in their generous giving.

While I was at New Word Alive recently they announced that they were going to take a collection one evening for a number of different things. We saw videos and heard speak some of those involved in the causes that the collection would go for. On the evening as we made our way into the big marquee we were each given an envelope into which we could put a gift or on which we could fill in our credit card details and the amount given and of course Gordon sign it for gift aid.

Can I say that as I did that I went through a series of issues. The main one was how much to give and as I was doing that I was aware that my daughter sitting next to me or the man sitting the other side might be able to see what I was writing on the envelope or putting in it. Suddenly I felt under pressure to be seen to be giving a good amount. That was of course ridiculous because what I give is between me and God. But we can find ourselves giving for the wrong reasons but I had to be honest and say that perhaps the reason I was feeling under pressure was because I was not being generous. If I had been then probably I would not have minded who saw, though of course we never should flaunt our giving.

These Macedonian Christians had no such problem. They may not have known that Paul was writing about them to the Corinthians but they would not have minded because their giving was generous.

2. They were proactive v3b&4

“Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.” I’m not sure whether or not that amazed Paul but it would amaze most church treasurers if people came up to them and pleaded with them for the chance to give. Again we ask what was the motivation for this? If we look at v5 perhaps we see part of the answer there, “And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.”

Even Paul did not expect what these Macedonian Christians did. He says they gave themselves first to the Lord, that is they recommitted themselves to the Lordship of Jesus, they gave their whole lives to him. Paul’s teaching as we see in 2 Cor 4:5 was “Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” and here we see the response – they gave themselves first to Jesus and then to Paul. Their giving was part of their being followers of Jesus. It was part of their life as his disciples. In the same way that they worshipped, and served and reached out, so they gave. This was what had been taught by Paul was part of their being Christians and now they were working it out, though their generosity and desire took even Paul by surprise. This is unusual in that they were not going to let Paul leave Macedonia without giving them the opportunity to give towards the needs of the Christians in Jerusalem. The bottom line was they gave not because they were asked but rather they asked to give because they desperately wanted to give.

3. They were poor v2

We do need to recognise this. These Macedonian Christians didn't give because they had a lot of money and so to give some to Jerusalem wasn't really going to matter. No instead they were extremely poor and yet they gave generously and they gave more than they were able. In other words they gave sacrificially. To give beyond what they were able meant that they were going to have to go without something in order to give to others. What motivated them to give in this way? Well in our discussions in our homegroup this week we looked at this and one point raised was that perhaps having so little they could identify with those in a similar position. In other words they were giving not out of sympathy as we might give when we give say to earthquake victims or tsunami victims but out of empathy out of a sense of I know what you are going through.

4. They were under trial v2

These Christians were suffering. It was probable that they were suffering persecution under which many had been fined or had their property taken away. Life was very tough and you could have forgiven them for being focussed on their own situation because that is often what we do isn't it. However that was not what was happening in these Macedonian churches instead as Paul put it, "out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."

The sentence may not make sense to you. What Paul was saying was the results of the problems they were going through led them to great joy and deep poverty, one I can understand but not the other. However, both of those the joy and the poverty were the causes of their great generosity. The trials they were going through were part of the causes of the generous giving.

Again I ask what caused such generosity to spring out of such hardship? Well again I could speculate and I could suggest all of the above – the awareness of the need, the teaching they had received and their empathy and I am sure that all these things are there.

In addition all these things speak to us today about our motivation for giving. We are I hope aware of the needs both here in Christ Church and in the wider church and world, we have been taught that Jesus is Lord of all and that our response to his Lordship is to give ourselves to the Lord, and we can empathise with different needs and hopes again both here in Christ Church and beyond.

However, Paul makes it clear what the prime motivating factor was. Can you see it in our passage? V1, "And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches". Their motivation came from God and from the grace of God.

Why did they give so generously despite the tough times they were going through and the poverty they were enduring? Why, because these people were gripped by the amazing grace of God. But we ask, who were these people? Well there was the jailer who came to faith while Paul was in prison, the fortune telling slave girl, then in Thessalonica there was Jason who had been arrested for letting

Paul stay in his house and so on. They were ordinary people whose lives had been turned around by the grace of God in Jesus. Yes it had been tough for them since but the grace of God was worth it and in view of that grace, gripped by that grace they wanted to share what they had with others. They saw that everything they were and had was a result of the grace of God. The grace of God was their chief motivation. One of the CD's I have in my car has a song on it with these words, "When I was lost, You came and rescued me; Reached down into the pit and lifted me. O Lord, such love, I was as far from You as I could be. You know all the things I've ever done, But Jesus' blood has cancelled every one. O Lord, such grace To qualify me as Your own."

That is the grace these Christians had experienced and the same grace many of us here have experienced and that grace has an effect in people's lives. The song continues with some of those effects, "There is a new song in my mouth, There is a deep cry in my heart, A hymn of praise to Almighty God - hallelujah! And now I stand firm on this Rock, My life is hidden now with Christ in God. The old has gone and the new has come - hallelujah! Your love has lifted me."

A new song or as here overflowing joy and here the result was very practical a desire to give as a response to all God had given them. That was their motivation and that is the motivation I want to hold before us today. Their sacrificial giving stemmed ultimately not from any teaching or awareness of need and empathy towards that. Their generosity stemmed from the generous grace of God that had drawn them to him and saved them in Jesus. That is something that cannot be taught rather it is something that happens to us as God gives his grace and as we live in his grace.

I remember some years back going to the Alps on holiday and one day we went white water rafting. The two children were in one boat with some other youngsters and I was in another with some more adults. While we were crashing down the river canyon at one point a man fell out and we did what we had been told earlier on to get him back in because it was dangerous in amongst the rocks. So you can imagine my concern a little while later when I saw first my son come floating past our boat in the river and then my daughter and various others from their boat. However, our guide explained we were nearly at the end of the trip and the river here was safe and if we wanted to get out and float in the river down to the end we could. I thought it looked good so I was out of the boat and floating down. I was totally in the flow of the river. That is how I picture these Macedonian Christians in the flow of God's grace which was producing all kinds of amazing results in them in terms of joy and now generosity. They were growing in their understanding that all they were and had was of God. In grace God had given them so much and they were caught up in that giving in grace and so Paul encouraged the Corinthian Christians and would encourage us to v7 "excel in this grace of giving". But as I say this is not something we are taught it happens as God stirs us through his Holy Spirit to see all he has done for us and then he leads us to respond.

I don't know what motives the round the world cyclist, the suicide bomber and so on.

However I do know what motivated these Christians whom Paul held up as an example to the Corinthian church and who he holds up as an example to us and that was the grace of God. My prayer through all our giving in grace programme is that God will help us see more of his grace and in so doing will lead us to respond to that grace in whatever way he wishes.