



don't outsource your charity

Thank you to Joyce and Titus for telling us about the work of *Send a Cow*. [This followed an interview led by one of our Churchwardens with two staff from the charity [Send a Cow](#)]

It may surprise some of you to know that as a teenager I helped on my brother's farm, looking after and milking his herd of Friesians. I was once charged with leading the herd along the road towards the farm for milking, being told that they were well behaved and would follow me. They realised a twelve year old was hardly worth taking seriously, and chaos ensued, bringing traffic to a halt and making me wary to this day of herds, bovine and human...

Because of the interview we have just heard, this sermon is to be short. I wondered what to suggest we consider in the time available. Today's gospel [Mark 10.2-16, see below] offers two subjects, each one of which would be worth exploring: first, the weaselly question from the Pharisees to test Jesus, about whether it is 'lawful for a man to divorce his wife' (note the wording; the reverse appears not to have been on the cards).

The other about what children represent in the story and the significance of Jesus welcoming them.

The first of those – whether a man can divorce his wife and Jesus's elaboration of it into the famous injunction seemingly against divorce by any means – '*therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate*' – is contentious these days; especially in a congregation like ours. As is the setting of marriage in strictly binary terms of man and wife. The second, about children, has always seemed to me too readily lassoed by a

sentimental reading when its core message is surely altogether clearer.

Leaving aside both those interesting themes, as I read yesterday about the work of *Send a Cow* my thoughts moved to the work of charities more generally and of *charity* itself. After several decades working in social services I now work for a charity, so I declare an interest. We are a grantmaker, and make grants of around £2 million each year in one of London's 32 boroughs to fund a wide range of activity all aimed at improving the long-term, whole-life earning prospects of people from low income households. The work is needed because poverty exists in the UK. In some of the Wards we cover, 40% of children are growing up in poverty. The City of Westminster, where this church stands, comes in at 38% children living in poverty – astonishing.

'Charity' today has a rather narrow meaning. Its history is richer. It is derived from the Latin 'caritas', meaning preciousness, dearness, high price. In the Christian narrative, *caritas* became the standard Latin translation for the Greek word *agape*, meaning love for others. The King James Bible, when translating one of the letters attributed to Paul, gives us "faith, hope and charity" – charity here being love (the word now favoured by most translations). Hard then to believe, but the word charity once had a far deeper, radical meaning that it has today. When speaking of charity now we usually mean giving money or, less often, giving our time, to third-party structures.

Today 'charity' is synonymous with charitable organisations, legal entities, that 'do good'. Very many of them do just that, some very effectively – as we heard this morning. But what they also risk doing (without of course

intending it) is to outsource, even impersonalise, what (according to the origin of the term charity) should be to a great extent personal and immediate.

This is not to denigrate charity in our contemporary sense; but it is perhaps something of a reproach to ourselves where our charitable giving finds little mirroring in the immediacy of our daily lives and those who people them. This is a risk as old as the hills: getting what we say and what we do out of sync. It can affect all of us. And it becomes a greater problem the less local our lives become and the less in touch with one another are our hearts and our minds.

Charities today are big business. Some much bigger than others, with vast turn-overs, highly paid senior staff, some hugely dependent on government contracts (in which case, are they still charities?). Others are small and unable to make much impact once the overheads and regulatory obligations are complied with.

All enjoy significant tax relief, and to that extent are supported by the tax payer whether she/he supports a particular cause or not. There are some important social and ethical questions buried in all this that are largely left unexamined.

In the market place, the advice is 'buyer beware'. In the world of charitable enterprise it must be 'giver beware'. It is more than checking how much of your pound reaches the beneficiary and how much is taken in overheads (quality services do in fact cost money to deliver). It includes, perhaps, some rigour with ourselves: what *exactly* are the causes that for you are a priority? And how do you wish to see them addressed? Don't be afraid to stop and re-target your giving if the answers to those questions change over time. Don't be taken in by selective case studies and professional PR. Consider what giving might bring relief to suffering, for sure; but also give to charities that appear to want to break *cycles of suffering* by empowering beneficiaries.

Education remains a key, one that can break cycles of disadvantage. In parts of the world where poverty is endemic and absolute, ensuring that girls enter and stay in the classroom produces astonishing social and cultural change. A powerful, simple, formula. And a reminder that social justice and charity ought never be decoupled.

I hope we might think about charity with its historical root in mind. We should give what we can, but money is but part of it. Being charitable (old fashioned though it sounds) is a disposition, *a real giving of ourselves*. Indeed, it is important to be charitable *towards oneself*, loving towards oneself: this often being the step needed to be able to better love others. A cliché but with truth. Charity towards others and a meanness of heart towards oneself distorts everything, including the good we wish to achieve.

The impulse to charity – in its earlier, broader meaning – also requires that we seek to remove obstacles to it. One of those obstacles is the persistent bane of human life, something called power relations. Hierarchies of nearly every kind. We got a glimpse of that when Mark rehearsed the old law about men being able to divorce their wives by a note, on a whim.

And what of an essential element to being fully human and charitable towards ourselves and others? The second part of today's rather curious gospel reading provides a pointer. *Childlikeness*: open, curious, unaffected, spontaneous, unfeigned, pure. We should nurture these qualities at every age. They deepen our charity and our lives.

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them." [Mark 10.13-16]

Hugh Valentine

Mark 10.2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.