

Stewards of God's Grace: March 2021

The joy and struggle of almsgiving

On Ash Wednesday each year we are invited "to observe a holy Lent by self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting, and **almsgiving**, and by reading and meditating on the word of God." What is almsgiving? How do we give them? Many of us somehow think that almsgiving equates with an additional offering to the church made in Lent. But there is far more to it than that.



Our word alms is derived from the Greek words *eleos* and *mamonas* which are the words for compassion and money. Alms are mercy-money given out of compassion to meet the needs of the poor. Jewish, Christian and Muslim teachings all emphasize that people of faith are to imitate God's mercy by compassionate giving to those in need. In Judaism the biblical injunction to leave part of the harvest in the field so that the poor could glean what they need developed into an obligation to charitable giving or *tzedakah*. For Jewish people the highest form of charity is to give so that others are self-reliant and no longer needing charity—a merging of compassion with justice. In Christianity a quarter of the offering received in the early church was for the relief of the poor. After tithing developed as a practice, the poor boxes built into some Christian churches were a reminder that alms for the poor were given as a compassionate offering in addition to one's tithe. In Islam, *zakat*, or the giving of alms, is the third of the five pillars of Islam. While there are various rules attached to the practice, in general it is the obligation to give away 2.5% of one's savings and business revenue as well as 5-10% percent of one's harvest, to the poor. The recipients include the destitute, working poor, those unable to pay off debts, stranded travelers, and others who need assistance. In all three faiths, the underlying principle is that those who have give to those who have not while at the same time working to alleviate the conditions that cause or exacerbate poverty.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the author reminds them to work honestly "so as to have something to share with the needy" (Eph. 4:28) We labour to meet our needs and the needs of others—to have the joy of being generous as God is generous. But let's be honest—generosity isn't always easy! It can be a struggle to give away that which we have worked hard to gain. Perhaps that is why almsgiving is part of the Lenten discipline. We need it to grow more fully into the image of our loving, compassionate and generous God. Alongside prayer, fasting, reading Scripture, confessing our sins and considering how we might change for the better, almsgiving is a way of growing spiritually.

If you have not yet started putting aside alms this Lent consider doing so. Figure out what you will get on your tax return or what you might spend on a weekly take-out meal or a new outfit or daily coffee at the drive-through and use it to help others. If your congregation has designated a Lenten offering for the purpose of helping those in need, give to that. If it hasn't, be the person who makes sure that happens next year. And this year give instead to the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund, your local food bank or other organization that you know will use your alms to make a difference in someone's life. And may you discover (or rediscover) the joy of giving as God has given to you!

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