

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Saint Paul underwent a dramatic conversion, preached the gospel on missionary journeys, and wrote letters to form the faith of other believers. Most people know all that. You may even know about his dramatic escape from harm hiding out in a basket while friends lowered him over a city wall, or his miraculous rescue from a shipwreck near Malta. Less well known is that Paul took on another responsibility: He became a fundraiser. Today's second reading takes verses from two chapters of his Second Letter to the Corinthians, where he asks his readers to contribute to Christians suffering poverty in Jerusalem. The people of Macedonia had already demonstrated their generosity, and now it was the Corinthians' turn. Surely they don't want to look stingy when their neighbors have given so much.

Paul compliments the Corinthians for their faith, discourse, knowledge, earnestness and the reception of his love. He writes, "may you excel in this gracious act also." He argues from the example of Jesus. Paul writes, "you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." The Son of God had it all; he had no need to come into the world and suffer for us, but he became lowly to lift us up. Paul hoped the Corinthians would feel the same largesse. He calls it "a matter of equality" that "your abundance at the present time should supply their needs, so that their abundance may also supply your needs, that there may be equality."

Many people become envious when they compare what others have with their own possessions, gifts and opportunities. Others know the joy of sharing. They're not only bringing more equality into the world, but the decrease of their own possessions brings an increase of satisfaction for doing the right thing.

Paul was raising money among Gentile Christians for the sake of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. After a year or more of fundraising, he did well, but then faced the challenge of transporting the money. There were no banks. Probably someone took the large number of small coins in exchange for fewer coins of larger value to make the collection easier to carry. Paul took along Titus and some other trusted companions to protect themselves against thieves and to ward off any avarice among themselves. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he faced all too frequent opposition and torment for preaching the gospel, but he was able to fulfill the task that preoccupied him in today's reading. At least, we think so. The bible never records the proud moment when Paul, after all his fundraising and the perils of the travel, handed over the collection to the Christians of Jerusalem. Were they grateful? Did they distribute it fairly? We don't know.

This is true of a lot of the charity today. People who raise funds want to ensure that the donors hear what their gifts have done. But sometimes when we give, we just don't know. We may not even receive an acknowledgement. Hearing "thank you" is itself a motivation to give again, but Paul did not list that motive in his appeal. Giving is good for its own sake. It imitates what Christ did for us. Sometimes we do not thank God sufficiently for the gifts we've received. That doesn't stop God from giving again. It's quite an example.