

Dear Friends,

The current situation is shining a light on people's character in intriguing ways. Many people have been revealed as generous with their time and talents in volunteering for the NHS or their favoured charity, or by simply helping a neighbour. I was intrigued to read about a donation of £100 million to Oxford University to fund microbial research. Sir Jim Ratcliffe, the donor, is reputed to be the UK's 5th richest person. The donation represents about a twelfth of his fortune. His gift is reminiscent of John Wesley's maxim, 'earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can'.

Jesus' attitude to generosity is noteworthy. He singled out the poor widow who humbly gave her 'mite' in the Temple as being praiseworthy because she gave all she could.

2021 has begun with many charities and churches facing particular challenges. The Methodist Church faces the challenge of reaching out to a new generation, in the face of shrinking membership. The Connexion has compiled an 8-part strategy for evangelism and growth. It is called 'God for All'. In some ways we would also be justified in turning this title on its head and speaking of 'All for God'. This strategy was discussed at length by our circuit mission group, assisted by the summary of 'God for All', compiled by James Strawson.

Our circuit mission group were enthused with the idea of 'Everyone an Evangelist' which - though a little scary for many of us - is arguably essential for the health of the church. The phrase, "a church without walls" was used. One church in the circuit had placed chatting chairs outside their chapel for passers-by to use. Many valuable conversations took place. Another church has held cream teas outside the building in order to engage walkers and cyclists in conversation. There are many constraints upon us just now, but the group was keen that our churches have 'oven ready' plans to implement quickly when it is safe to do so, so as to minister to the post-lockdown legacy of loneliness. 'Everyone an Evangelist' is a mission plan that is relatively inexpensive but is arguably the most effective church growth strategy of all.

St Peter writes an important verse when he addresses the tribulations faced by the Church of his day (1 Peter 1:7). He speaks of 'the proven genuineness of your faith - of greater worth than gold'. I have probably never met anyone who could even dream of making a donation like that of Sir Jim Ratcliffe. I do

know many people whose faith is of greater worth than gold and is a precious gift to offer to other people. Sir Jim's gift may prevent many premature deaths through the discoveries the research it funds will unlock. When we share our faith, we may help someone to receive eternal life in Christ.

'Everyone an Evangelist' doesn't call upon us to buttonhole strangers. It invites us to engage in what has been called 'friendship evangelism', which builds trust through kindness. It doesn't require us to pretend to have an expertise beyond our knowledge, it asks us to share our own experience of following Jesus. It doesn't involve forcing our own beliefs onto anyone else, though it may lead us to offer to pray for someone in difficulty. It may involve us saying, "I don't know the answer to your question, but I know that I have experienced the presence of God, who has answered my prayer." Above all it may mean saying "God loves you" to someone who feels unlovable.

A Lent Book you may like to consider reading, if you are interested in the topic of faith sharing is 'Living His Story: Revealing the extraordinary love of God in ordinary ways: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2021' by Hannah Steele.

A man whose gentle ministry may be said to epitomise the gracious sharing of faith was Rev Norman Edsall, who recently passed away. He was a long serving URC minister who has been associated with Godalming United Church since his retirement. He has offered pastoral care and leadership during interregnums and was both an able preacher and a skilful chair of meetings. He will be sadly missed by all his friends at Godalming, and especially by Maureen and their children. Please support all his family in your prayers.

Many God bless you and keep you safe,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister.

