

And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three. But the greatest of these is charity...

I fail to understand why old-fashioned charitable works attract such sneers – and especially among those who should know better: the church hierarchy. Some years ago a distinguished visiting preacher – I'd better not name him – came to our church to preach at the City New Year Service. There were assembled, I suppose, upwards of two hundred and fifty liverymen. The preacher, thinking to startle them all with his radical social gospel, said, "Money is important. But money isn't everything." And there sitting before him, listening to this guff with gentlemanly politeness and equanimity, were such as Lord Levine, Sir Brian Jenkins and the then Lord Mayor Sir David Howard.

Afterwards, as I was escorting the distinguished preacher over to the Reception in Drapers' Hall, he asked me, "How did you think my address went down then?" I said, "I liked the Irish joke that you started with. – a man standing at the crossroads with the existential decision, Which pub shall I go in? And the local Paddy tells him, 'Well you see, if you go in the one, you'll wish you went in the other'. But telling these chaps that money isn't everything really is preaching to the converted. Those liverymen spend about 2% of their income on wining and dining and the rest of their time in tedious committees thinking of how they can give the rest of it away."

Charity.

In the end, it seems to me, what is done by fiat is never as good as what is done by friendship. And this, as the football commentator would say, is what charity is all about. In other words, charity – and the other word for it is love – is always personal. It is heartfelt.

The Worshipful Company of Chartered Secretaries and Chartered Administrators is in the habit of charitable giving and has been for its whole history. This year our Trustees have supported the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the St Botolph's Project, Barnado's, Barts' Cancer Appeal – and I dare say, with gratitude, St Sepulchre's church.... A bit.

But charity is even wider than this. The status of being a member of a livery company carries with it high moral duty; and the first of these duties is to exercise charity, not only by financial giving but in the sense of behaving towards all people in a charitable manner – what St Paul describes as "forbearing one another in love". Charity does not stop with putting my hand in my pocket; it means employing the faculty of the imagination to realise that other people's cares and joys are as real as mine. As Kant said, it means never treating people as means to an end, but as ends in themselves. The great Danish Christian Kierkegaard put it graphically: "Most people are subjective towards themselves and objective towards others: the need is for us to be objective towards ourselves and subjective towards others."

The outward and visible signs of the charitable disposition are courtesy, manners, chivalry and ceremonial. And all these things are enshrined in the livery from the very beginning. If manners maketh man, then even more so do manners make the liveryman. Manners, courtesy, chivalry and ceremonial do more than merely oil the

wheels and add dignity to our procedures: they exist to bear constant witness to the commandment to uphold the charitable disposition.

Charity, like all virtue, is always personal. As in the touching story of Vincenzo Valdrati the 18th century Italian painter and architect who came to England in 1770 and designed the state rooms at Stowe. While at Stowe he attended a wedding and when the bridegroom failed to appear, he was so moved at the bride's distress that he chivalrously offered himself as a substitute – and was accepted. It's true but it sounds like a joke. All good jokes are true. Think of the headline "Father of nine fined £100 for failing to stop". Or the psychiatrist who asked, "Did you wake up grumpy this morning?" And she answered, "No – I let him sleep." Charity is the laughter of God.

Charity is said to cover the multitude of sins and it does so because it is the life of God himself.

What does it mean when it says that charity – or the word with which it is interchangeable, "love" – is stronger than death? Simply this: that the fear of disease, death, dissolution is bound up with one's sense of self. Charity is what liberates us from the tyranny of the self. In charity we seek the good of the other and as we become lost in self-forgetfulness, we lose our fear. That is what is meant when it is said that love is stronger than death, and that perfect love casts out fear.

When we actually achieve love and self-giving, even only rarely and even only a little bit, a most strange transformation occurs: we find that the self we sacrificed if only for a minute is given back to us in that loving meeting with our neighbour. And this self that we discover is our true self, because like Christ's own self, it is the self we have given away. And this is the only version of myself that I can live with. *For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Finally, the New Testament does not stop with the saying that God is loving or charitable or kind-hearted. It says, "God IS love." This is the ultimate truth about reality. There is nothing to overcome or go better than charity. There is no greater reality. Charity, love, is throughout all time and eternity what there really is. .

Now abideth faith, hope and charity: these three. And the greatest of these is charity. Amen.