

Gone but not forgotten



*The Theology of leaving a legacy
in your will.*

General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church
Scottish Charity Number SC015962

"And if he have not before disposed of his goods, let him then be admonished to make his Will, and to declare his debts, what he oweth, and what is owing to him; for the better discharging of his conscience, and the quietness of his Executors. But men should often be put in remembrance to take order for the settling of their temporal estates whilst they are in health."

From the rubrics of 'The Visitation of the sick'. Scottish Prayer Book 1929

Leaving a legacy means that your will can be done

When my Grandma died she left me a painting of her grandfather. To others in the family it meant very little but to me it was a legacy to treasure (alongside the family photographs she had previously given me). The painting completed the pictorial representation of the branch of the family tree that had fascinated me since childhood.

My Grandma had decided that I was to be the recipient of the painting and the legacy of stories and memories that came with it. As such, I had a duty to receive them and hold them in trust until the time comes for me to pass them on.

The concepts of inheritance and legacy giving have a deep theological depth because they encompass more than one human life alone. In the Old Testament inheritance has great importance:

"The good leave an inheritance to their children's children.."

Proverbs 13:22a

And in the New Testament we are called 'inheritors with Christ in the Kingdom of God'. What this means is that we share in the mission of God in the world by building upon the legacies of others and in turn leaving our own legacies to be developed by those who follow.

We are called by God to decide how it is we are to share in the 'Divine' purpose and how we are to serve others within it – be it by prayer, evangelism, faithfulness or by acting as a wise custodian or steward of those things treasured by God. We do this in partnership with each other and in doing so overcome personal limitations. It is this sense of community co-operation that allows our commitment to work beyond the span of our life-time. It also expresses faith in the reality of God's promises and a hope that seeds we plant will one day come to bear fruit for others if not ourselves.

This looking at the wider picture or having a big vision of the world has always sustained people of faith, whether that be when wandering in the wilderness, en-route to the 'Promised Land' or working for social justice, equity and peace in 21st century Scotland. A legacy is more than money or goods alone. A legacy brings with it a sense of promise, faithfulness and hope – that's why squandering an inheritance as the prodigal son did is so shocking.

Theologically, a legacy implies: sign and continuity, conferring of purpose and an affirmation of that purpose; giving it a validity and meaning. Such as God's covenant with Noah or Abraham and most importantly the legacy of God's love made manifest in Christ.

The problem with the legacy concept today

In the society we now inhabit the concept of gifting a legacy is becoming increasingly difficult to perceive simply because People don't die! Death is seen not as a normal part of human life but as a failure on someone else's part. There is increasingly the idea that we must be kept alive as long as possible, regardless of our quality of life. This is also one of the reasons why increasing numbers of medical staff are sued when someone dies because someone has to be to blame. People are reluctant to think beyond their own lifetime anymore.

"Thinking about the contribution you make beyond your lifetime is much more difficult if you are spending a great deal of time, energy and money keeping your lifetime going as long as possible."

*Robin Stevens Church of England
Stewardship Advisor until 2006*

Individualism is rife; I want, therefore I shall have and in doing so achieve ultimate happiness is a way of life for many. Things wanted are gained and nothing is handed on or re-cycled. Have it all now, leave tomorrow to look after itself and if one has to make a will then leave something to the children and grandchildren but make sure you spend the rest on yourself before you go.

The need to 'control' is also a driving force for some too. Many people desire to control every aspect of their lives, down to the finest detail. That is why death has to be held off for as long as possible. The idea of leaving a bequest or legacy to someone you cannot then control, is an anathema.

As a result of all this, the image of the prodigal son has become an ikon to some rather than something shameful. Have it all now and hang the consequences! Like the prodigal son, however, we do get old and we do all die. Mortality and the possibility of limitation have to be faced in the end and when all thought of control has been lost you have to rely on the one who never rejects - God.

Looking to the future

Matters of finance, legacies and gifting are all part of the mission and ministry of the church. Sadly, all too many people fail to see the bigger picture when it comes to the Mission of God and believe the church to be 'after their money' or they hope beyond hope that somehow they can buy grace and eternal life with what they own.

As people of faith, we are called to challenge these perceptions and our own narrow minded vision. We are called to:

- *tackle individualism*
- *encourage giving to be seen as a thanksgiving for blessings received*
- *use legacies and bequests to fund the bigger picture and not to fill gaps or put sticking plaster on sinking ships.*

Legacies used well can enrich the whole community and inject value and meaning into people's lives but to do so we have to be clear about what our missionary aims and objectives are and to use any gift we receive to help bring those hopes to reality.