**St John's, Old Malden 18/10/26**
**Readings:** Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 8-12; Colossians 3:12-17; Matthew 24:30-35

*"Generous God, all that we have comes from your loving hand; open our hearts now to hear your word and to respond with faith, trust, and gratitude." Amen*

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today during your Giving and Generosity Campaign. As we sit here together, our readings gave us a picture of what that means. To be God's people together!

In Nehemiah, we find the people of Israel gathered as one. They have returned from exile. Jerusalem is being rebuilt. Life has not been easy. They have known uncertainty, hardship and change. Yet when Ezra reads God's word to them, they listen attentively. They are moved to tears but are reassured with the words: *"Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

In today's society it is just as hard to remember that God is our strength. Modern day enforces the belief we have to rely on ourselves, prioritise our own needs. No one else will help us out. Yet from the Old Testament to the New we are reminded, we should ALWAYS trust in God.

In Colossians, Paul describes the character of a Christian community. They are people who are clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, patience and love. Living mercifully with one another and with thanks, so that the peace of Christ rules their hearts.

And finally, in the Gospel of Matthew; Jesus reminds his disciples that many things in life will change. Yet one thing remains certain: *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."*

All three readings point us towards how we are called to live as Christians. Trusting in God for He is our strength, living faithfully together in every generation, that being compassionate and kind are part of God's mission and that with the Gospel the words will always live, and it's our role to proclaim it!

That brings us to St John's. Firstly, there is so much to celebrate and give thanks for. Recently you received wonderful news that funding has been secured from the National Lottery to help drive the Restore Project forward. What a tremendous vote of confidence in the vision, commitment and potential of St John's! Not only is this a fantastic project for the church bringing much needed restoration to the building. It is also an opportunity to deepen service with the community links with Wild Kingston. The Nature hub and heritage trails will engage with local schools educating everyone on the importance of their environment, and how we can all respect and care for it.

This should all be celebrated! But it is also important to understand what such funding does and does not do. The funding is for the Restore Project. It will not cover the everyday costs of running the church. It doesn't pay the electricity bills, the insurance, maintenance, or the Parish Support Fund. It does not keep the church doors open for prayer, welcome and ministry. That, is funded both in time and resources by **all** of us.

So, if St John's is doing wonderful things for the community, if the church is open every day serving people in ways that matter, what can we do to support the church that makes all of that possible?

The reality at St John's is that a small number of people are carrying most of the financial burden. Around 80% of giving comes from just 15 households. We are enormously grateful

for those faithful and generous supporters. Their commitment has sustained the church and continues to do so. We thank God for them but financially this is precarious and leaves the church vulnerable.

If one or two households were no longer able to give, the impact would be significant. Practically speaking, the challenge is not finding a few more major donors but sharing the responsibility more widely.

And that is where today's readings speak directly to us.
In Nehemiah, rebuilding Jerusalem was not the work of a handful of people. It was a shared endeavour. Everyone had a role, everyone contributed and participated in the rebuilding. Likewise, in the Church, stewardship is not something for a select few. It is part of discipleship, and I say discipleship, because giving is not ultimately about money and budgets it is about our relationship with God.

It's interesting to note that Jesus spoke about money and giving more than any other practical subject. It is only second to love! This isn't because he was an early day fundraiser! But he knew that human spending and giving revealed the individual's priorities. We recall the rich man who asked Jesus how to get into heaven and then went away heartbroken when Jesus told him to sell everything and follow him.

God does not want us to go hungry, the disciples following Jesus did not starve, but giving is one of the ways we worship. It is one of the ways we participate in God's work. It is one of the ways we express gratitude.

In Nehemiah the people are told to celebrate by enjoying *"choice food and sweet drinks"* but also, more importantly, to *"send some to those who have nothing prepared.*"

Paul says in Colossians, *"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God."*

Giving is a way we say thank you. Think of someone who has transformed your life with love, kindness, or sacrifice. Do you ask, "How little can I give back?" With those relationships we want to respond generously, because generosity is what gratitude looks like when it becomes action.

We are called to share the Gospel, we are called to care, to reach out and throw open the doors spreading the word and being the body of Christ on earth. Just as the early church supported Paul as he spread the gospel through Asia and Europe we are called to support each other across the Diocese to enable churches to be open and the Gospel to be shared.

This campaign is not about causing guilt or asking people to make promises they can't keep. We recognise the reality of life today, many are feeling the effects of rising costs. Household budgets are stretched and for some increasing their giving will be genuinely difficult.

God knows this, and He does not call us all to give the same amount. But we are called to consider what faithful generosity looks like in our own circumstances. What does our spending say about our priorities. The other week I was at a church in Kennington and a woman came up to me after the service to ask about the Parish Giving Scheme. Her job was paid hourly so her income was irregular and she felt understandably worried about signing up to give a fixed amount every month. She explained how she budgeted, she would sit down work out her income for the month and then put her donation to church first and then all the bills afterwards. God and her faith were her priority.

Some of you may be able to review what you currently give, others may not be able to give more at this time. Some of you may not have ever considered planned giving as part of Christian discipleship. This is why Fr Michael has made a simple request: would those who can consider increasing their giving by £2.50 a week? Much less than the cost of a decent cup of coffee.

For some that may feel like a huge amount, for others not, but across a congregation it could make a real difference. We all have something to offer and perhaps sometimes we underestimate the impact of what we can give. So I ask you to remember the young boy who offered five loaves and two fish. We may look at what we have and ask how can this possibly make any difference, but in God's hands, ordinary gifts become instruments of extraordinary blessings.

A church supported by many regularly giving what they can is stronger and healthier than a church dependent on a small number carrying the load. The early Church understood this, Christian communities have always involved sharing responsibility. Everyone is called to contribute to the ministry and mission of the church.

So the question is "What is God calling me to do?" and that answer will be different for each of us. But for all of us it will mean prayerfully reviewing our giving in light of God's blessings over the years. It may mean we begin giving regularly or increasing what we already give. Or perhaps it’s finding other ways to give or making a plan for the future.

But for all of us it means remembering that generosity is not primarily about money. It is about trust. Trust that God will give us enough. Trust that God's work is worth supporting. Trust that what we place in God's hands He will bless and do miraculous things with.

As we look to the future, there is every reason to be hopeful.
The Restore Project brings exciting opportunities. This church remains active, visible and engaged with the community. Relationships are being built, lives are being transformed, faith is being nurtured. God is here working among us! So let’s all be a part in sustaining and strengthening that work.

In today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that many things pass away, but his words never will. Buildings matter. Projects matter. Finances matter. But they ONLY matter because they enable the mission to continue.

*“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

Amen.