

St Brandon's, Sermon for 16th January 2022.

1 Corinthians 12.1-11. John 2:1-11

Gifts in unison

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We are in the middle of the season of Epiphany: its been two weeks since the Kings' visit, and another two Sundays still to go.

In this season we reflect on the revelation of Christ to those around him through his baptism, and the miracle at Cana that we heard today;

on the revelation of Christ to the whole world by the visit of the wise men – the three Kings; and on unity - next week is the week of Christian unity - and today's sermon picks up those themes.

Gifts! The kings brought gifts to the baby Jesus, and Paul tells us the Spirit brings gifts to each of us: we are rich!

In Sunday School they acknowledged the strangeness of those gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh – for a baby! And perhaps some of the gifts we receive can seem equally obscure until the time is right for them to be used.

We may find it hard to recognise them as gifts, or for others see them as gifts, but God equips us throughout life for the work he wants us to do for him.

Whether they are more or less obvious, the gifts are given *for the common good*.

Sometimes gifts seem very obvious, even a bit in your face, and Paul is referring to those in the church in Corinth who were very 'in your face' in their shows of ecstasy during worship, particularly when they started talking in tongues – strange words supplied by the spirit - which was causing others to feel inadequate and uneasy.

Paul reminds the congregation that the Spirit of **God** will only be at work in those gifts that bring glory to God: it cannot be the Spirit speaking if the message is "*Let Jesus be cursed!*", no, the message that comes from the Spirit of God will always be, "*Jesus is Lord.*" They are not to be misled by the confidence and extravagance of these people, and enticed to follow them or they will be as badly off as they were as pagans, worshipping idols that could not speak.

Our gifts are not to be used competitively, with the underlying objective of putting another person down, or demonstrating a superiority.

They are not to engender a sense of inadequacy in another, nor are we, therefore, to compare ourselves either boastfully, or as failures, because of a gift we do, or do not, possess.

If these gifts are for the common good, they are for building all of us up, and increasing our awareness of the Spirit at work amongst us. They are to bring us together, not divide us into camps of 'can doers' and 'can't doers'.

We need to get good at recognising the range of gifts, activities and services that the Spirit engenders, recognising for others, where the gift might be for them, and encourage them in that vein.

It is so easy to feel invisible and overlooked amongst a group of capable people. It is so easy to feel worthless when the role we have fulfilled so capably is taken away from us by life's circumstances: if we have been defined as the person who always served in the kitchen, or led on strategy, or provided beautiful flower arrangements, or music, and then we suffer a bereavement, ill-health or infirmity, how are we enabled to change roles without loss of identity and perceived value? Yet we can all bring to mind examples of those we have known in our church family who radiated love and prayerfulness long after their physical capacities had left them. Finding our way together through these questions brings us closer, builds unity.

Paul lists examples of gifts that can be activated by the Spirit of God: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, and lastly (in order to bring certain Corinthians down a peg), those who speak in tongues or interpret tongues. It is a broad list and by no means an exhaustive list, focussing largely on worship which was the issue he was writing about to the Corinthian church, rather than activities and services; God's Spirit is, of course, at work in all areas of our lives.

Last week a nurse told me she had had cancer at the age of 23 and a lot of her innards had been removed leaving her permanently prone to bowel trouble, poor sleep etc. However, as a result, a few years later she trained to screen people for cancer and other abnormalities, and despite her own physical frailty, she said she loves her work. She shone with pleasure as she said that, and acknowledged that her own experiences gave her the extra dimension she brought to the patient relationship; I felt sure when she needed to impart less than good news, she would find the right words.

Is this analogous to the myrrh? Something (in this case, cancer) that was not, in itself, a comfortable or fitting thing for a gift but pointed to the gift that would come in the wake of it?

... And, as I reflected on this story, and gifts, it made me wonder, what gift did I have that she chose to share that story with me?

As Paul says, we do not choose the gifts we are given, the Spirit chooses: *'All these [gifts] are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.'*

One of the gifts listed by Paul is *'the working of miracles'*.

I don't think I have ever witnessed something I would call a miracle – not the real McCoy like Jesus changing water into wine.

But miracles **are** attributed to saints, and there's sufficient evidence surrounding that for them to have been canonised.

These are people the Spirit chose to reveal new facets of our understanding of God, and what faith in God might look like, and to do that writ large, a blessing enduring centuries.

The stories are re-told through generations to inspire us to imitate them as best we can.

We can see the Spirit so clearly at work in the saints, working through them, their work and lives.

People talk about certain places as being 'thin places', places where they feel closest to God; when we are operating in the Spirit, exercising the gift given us, we are at our most transparent, showing the God in us, revealing God at work in our lives.

Gifts are things that are given and received.

They are not things that are earned, those are wages;

they are not deserved, those are rewards;

they are not requiring a return, those are contracts;

and they are not demanding a particular response, or they would be bribes.

Gifts signify a regard, a desire to demonstrate an affection, or compassion, given freely, and without strings.

That does not mean that there is no response.

Gifts can elicit gratitude, an awareness of reciprocal feelings of regard, of love, often both towards the giver and towards all that surrounds the recipient, an overflowing of love, for a time.

The Spirit's gifts are like this: they are Graces given freely and undeservingly, and the more we acknowledge that we have been given them, the more our love and gratitude towards God overflows within us. The love and gratitude overflows into our lives, into all that surrounds us, and enables us to use the gifts and doing so, it becomes our love response to God.

It becomes our gift in the Spirit to another, and reveals God again for a brief moment.

Jesus, gifted with every gift of the Spirit, was moved to change water into wine and save the host's embarrassment.

Only the servants assisting, Mary, and his disciples saw what happened; to them, *Jesus revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

Are we ready to see God's Spirit at work in those around us?

To see the glory of God where we live and work?

Our collect for today helpfully invites us to pray, '*transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory.*'

Amen.