

Gifts of the Spirit

Pentecost Sunday 2018

Last week I spoke about how the Holy Spirit can change every one of us. If we allow him, He can grow in us the qualities, the fruits, of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22) Some of you took the opportunity to be anointed as a way of asking the Holy Spirit to do this in you.

Today I want to say something about what the Holy Spirit wants to do with the church as a whole. The fact that today is often spoken of as the birthday of the church is a clue! The Holy Spirit wants to bring the church into existence. What this might mean is found in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where he describes the church as being like a human body. Paul picks up on two characteristics of the human body – diversity and unity.

Lets begin with the diversity. Its parts are very different: you cannot walk with your ears and you cannot smell with your elbow. (see 1 Corinthians 12) Yet all are essential parts of the body.

And this is true of the church. As so often in the New Testament you can pick up here implications of a squabble in the early church. If Paul was telling them, ever so gently, that everyone is important, we might conclude that there were some who thought otherwise. And it is quite possible that the same occurs in church life now. It is always possible in church life that there are those in prominent positions who think, arrogantly, that they matter more than those whose ministry is less prominent. It is perhaps more likely to happen the other way round, that those whose ministry is quiet and behind the scenes begin to believe that what they do is less important.

And then there are those who treat people according to the role they have in church: they defer to those whom they see as important and ignore the others. They chat up clergy and bishop. I found myself doing something similar last week. We had a visit at the Thornbury Centre from a government minister, a Lord in fact. We wanted to make an impression so the staff tarted up the building, painted the reception desk and a few walls, brought in a few plants. As I waited for Lord Bourne to arrive I picked up a few pieces of litter in the car park. And as I did so I asked myself why it was

that I was picking up litter for Lord Bourne and walked past it on other occasions. And I had no good answer.

The bad answer was that I thought Lord Bourne was more important than the people of Thornbury. The Apostle James would have been very scathing for he wrote:

My brothers and sisters,¹ do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

James 2:1-4

So, if ever you see me walk past a piece of litter in the church grounds, you have my permission to remind me that every person in Thornbury, and Pudsey is just as important as Lord Bourne.

So the Holy Spirit brings us together in diversity and equality to form the church. We are different but equal.

The second characteristic of a human body is that its diverse parts work together in unity for a purpose. In fact if they did not we would be totally ineffective as human bodies. And this is true of the church. For the church to work effectively, whether we mean the Christian church as a whole or St Margaret's Thornbury, it is absolutely essential that every person does what he or she can contribute and does it co-operation with the rest of the body. To change the image, we are an orchestra, not a bunch of soloists, we are the corps de ballet, not several dozen prima donnas!

But I have spoken so far as if it is a matter of each one of us doing what we are good at. To some extent that is true. But only to some extent. In a small congregation like this there may be many ministries for which no-one has a great natural skill. There are no retired solicitors or architects; there are no Associates of the Royal College of Music; no hordes of young people to cut lawns and move furniture; no natural evangelists or born preachers. So God has to use what's available. And he does! He certainly did it with

me. Thirty five years ago I was very doubtful if I could be a priest. But then I read these words of St Paul:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

1 Corinthians 2:1-4

If Paul was scared out of his wits, I thought, what excuse could I have? And exactly the same has happened here. I have seen people here in this congregation to respond to God's call 'in weakness and in fear and in much trembling'. But they have also responded in faith, faith that God would give them the ability to do what he needed. This is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples, shortly before the Ascension, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.' (Acts 1:8) That is the point of every gift, every ministry. Paul put it like this:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

It does not matter whether you are the priest, the churchwarden, the musicians, the cleaner, the tidyupperer – each ministry is exercised in the service of God for the common good. And if I do it for any other reason I am wasting my time. It is all built on what we spoke of last week – love. No gift, no ministry is of any value unless it is motivated by love. Paul said as much to the Corinthians:

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

I may work my socks off for St Margaret's church. But if I do it without love it is a waste of time.

Today I am going to offer anointing again. Last week I offered it for the fruits of the spirit and I am happy to do so again. As you reflect on your own ministry, within the church and within the world, it may be that you realize it is less effective than it might be because there is an attitude that is wrong. Perhaps you lack one of those gifts of the Spirit. If so, come to be anointed and ask the Holy Spirit to grow that fruit in you.

But you may like to move on a little. Perhaps there is a need in this church or in the world, that you are being called to meet. Perhaps you are reticent. 'I can't do that!' you think. You might be right if you think only in terms of your own strength. But perhaps God is greater than you are. Ask for what you need. Take Jesus seriously when he says:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Luke 11:9-13

N Clews
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