

Concerning spiritual gifts – 20.01.2019

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The Church in Corinth was clearly rather special to Paul. The letter we heard from in our New Testament reading brings it home. He had stayed there for about a year and a half during his incredible missionary journeys throughout the Middle East and had founded a very strong and active Church there. His Corinthian friends had stood by him when he'd been under attack from the local synagogue and had been hauled before the Roman authorities. He'd formed some very strong friendships.

At the beginning of his letter to them he writes "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus." That's nice. I expect people who've left here sometimes write letters to some of us and in their own way express thanks for everything this Church has meant to them.

I wonder, though, do they also say, as Paul went on to say to the Christians in Corinth, "... you are not lacking in any spiritual gift..."? Perhaps.

I wonder what 'spiritual gifts' people who come here from time to time, or even meet us frequently, find in us? I daresay you might have been a bit surprised at the ones Paul mentioned in connection with that Church in Corinth. He listed nine of them.

There's wisdom, an ability to make the right decisions and give the right advice.

There's knowledge, or in-depth understanding, presumably of things relating to the Faith; what we call Theology, understanding of the Bible and of Christian teaching.

Then there's the gift of faith, that kind of trust that holds firm even when things are going horribly wrong.

Some of them had the gift of healing, being able to restore to health people who are sick or suffering.

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Some of them were able to perform miracles, signs of God's power over nature.

Then there were those with the gift of prophecy, not so much in forecasting where things are heading but grasping and proclaiming messages from God.

Then there's that gift he calls 'discernment', having the ability to work out whether certain ideas really are from God rather than just from our own way of seeing things.

Apparently there were some who had the gift of speaking in a way that was inspiring yet only really intelligible to people on the same wavelength. They called it 'speaking with tongues'

Mercifully there were others who, having understood what they had learnt, had that gift of being able to explain it to the rest of us! (When I was studying Theology at university I always admired those few cracking good theologians who, as well as having such a good grasp of concepts of God also went that bit further by translating their wisdom into words and concepts that people like me could grasp and begin to understand.)

That's quite a formidable list of spiritual gifts those Christians in Corinth had. I wonder how many of those nine we have between us? Or which ones, if any, you think you personally have? Or you may, of course, have others. I notice a few that Paul doesn't list as being noticeably present in his Corinthian friends. There's the gift of organization and administration, keeping things going efficiently; or the gift of giving practical help when people are facing problems. And what about musical gifts, or gifts with words, or gifts for translating our concerns into prayer; then there are gifts of warmth of welcome, being there for people who need a neighbour. In their own way they are all 'spiritual gifts' – and you have them. They're being exercised here all the time.

There was, unfortunately, a problem developing at Corinth which Paul felt he had to address. The problem was that, with all that abundance of spiritual gifts amongst them, there was also that very unspiritual development of self-importance; a feeling that some of those gifts were

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of greater importance than others and that, therefore, those who had been given those particular gifts should be given a kind of preeminence. There was a kind of hierarchy of gift-holders developing that was causing unrest and unhappiness.

People were beginning to develop a kind of sense of inferiority in the presence of those whose gifts were considered rather more important than others. It was especially those gifts that brought with them a kind of notoriety, a form of what we now call 'celebrity status' that were featuring most strongly. To get the picture, you really need to read the whole section in I Corinthians chapters 12, 13 and 14 rather than just the snippets we're given in the Lectionary readings. Have a read through the whole section some time at home, preferably before next Sunday. That way you'll get the fuller picture and be much more aware of what is going to be read to you for the New Testament readings for the next couple of weeks.

So what did Paul have to say to his Christian friends in Corinth that might be appropriate for us here some two thousand years later.

He had four things to say – which comes as a bit of a surprise to those of us who've come to believe that all things theological always come in threes!

First, keep reminding yourself where you got that gift from. It's not down to you at-all, it's down to God. Every spiritual gift, he tells us, is from God and has come to us through his Spirit. They are 'charisma's', gifts of the Spirit. We have them entirely through God's grace. You've only got them because God gave them to you - so don't let yourself become at-all arrogant or puffed up about it. When you read or listen to chapter thirteen you'll hear that emphasized again.

The other side of that coin, of course, is that there's a world of difference between Christ-like modesty and self-effacement and failing to develop or use the gifts you've been given. There's a responsibility that inescapably goes with those Spirit-given gifts. Don't neglect them; use them well.

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Second, never forget what those gifts have been given for. They are there not for self-promotion and advancement or to fulfil hopes and expectations of parents, friends, colleagues or fans. They are given specifically and entirely for the benefit of the community to which you belong, which in this context is the Church. “To each” says Paul, “is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”. Nothing to do with yourself.

Third, no spiritual gift is of greater importance than any other - with one exception as we’ll hear later. There is no hierarchy of worth or importance when it comes to the gifts of the Spirit we are all called on to use in our ministry for the Church. Your gifts are as important as any I may have been given. Your ministry is as important as mine. When you read or listen to Paul developing this in the next chapter he very forcibly uses the analogy of the human body. Each member of the body is as important as any other. In his day, of course, he was not as aware as we are that it is also true that damaged or failing members can be aided or compensated by the others.

Number four. In the end, whatever gifts you may have and whatever importance you may attach to them, there is only one that ultimately really matters. It is love. Our God-given gifts are there to be used for the common good of the community to which we minister, all of us, but are nothing more than noisy gongs or clanging cymbals if they are not grounded in love. Listen again the Sunday after next, especially after you’ve read it for yourself at home, to Paul’s wonderful description of what love is actually all about in that thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Christians in Corinth. I do wish more people who talk of love would read what Christian love really is and then spend more time trying to put it into practice.

So to go back to what Paul wrote at the beginning of this section “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed”.

Amen to that.

BJH