

Being Church - Part 1 20.1.19 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

On Christmas Day in his sermon, Chris asked us the question - who remembers what they received as a Christmas present last year? He was asking us to reflect on how we valued the gifts we received. What significance did they hold for us? There was a telling silence in answer to his question. A year was a long time ago. Here we are, three weeks into January and I wonder what you are doing with the gifts you received this year? Are you using and appreciating them? Or were you disappointed in them- did you sense that little thoughtfulness lay behind them? Have you written thank-you letters? Did you take some back to the shop to exchange or get money back? Or have you laid some aside as unwanted – maybe to give later to someone else?

St Paul is writing to the church in Corinth about the gifts which have been given to them. Spiritual gifts – that is gifts given to God's people by God's Holy Spirit. Gifts that are given simply because of God's grace – out of God's love and bounty. The Greek word for grace is *charis*- Paul describes them as *charismata* – grace gifts – hence our use of the word 'charismatic' to describe these gifts of the Holy Spirit used to build up the church.

This takes us straightaway into a reflection about what it means to be church. The first thing to say is that a church is not a building – it is people. When St Paul and his colleagues went on their missionary journeys and established churches around the Mediterranean, they didn't buy buildings, they told the good news of Christ to the people and gathered those who responded together and another church was born. The Greek word *Ekklesia* means gathering or convocation. A group of people. Where they met was secondary – they often met in people's homes or where they could.

Dedicated buildings followed and we value our church buildings, they have a significance for us, they can speak of God to those who enter them, they can be a witness – but without an active congregation they

speak merely of tradition or something lost. We talk of coming to church but church isn't just something you come to - church is something you belong to.

Which is the point – for the church does not function as a secular organisation or a charity. It is God's institution, God's way of being for God's children, it exists in the relationships between the people who gather – because in Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit we belong to one another. That belonging is an expression of Christ – even the very body of Christ. The body of Christ is the image for next week's sermon but in the scriptures and across Christian denominations Christians are known as brothers and sisters in Christ. That identifies this connected relationship - we are not brothers and sisters in the squash club, or in the gardening club - but we are in church.

Getting involved in a church isn't a neutral activity - who we are matters, whether we are here or not here when we gather to worship makes a difference, how we express our faith together has an impact, how we make room for others to join us will reflect our connectedness and how sure we are in our relationships. Being church can be hard work – sometimes it can be very hard when the relationships aren't easy – but we can learn a lot about God and his grace as we negotiate them and work at them. Being church is about buy in, not opting out.

And it is not about being clones, being all the same. A lovely moment for me happened a number of years ago when this scripture was being read. And the reader instead of reading 'Now concerning spiritual gifts brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed' - read 'I do not want you to be uniformed'! We are not meant to be all the same. Church isn't just for people who look like us – who we feel comfortable with. It is for all ages, all nations and ethnicities, all backgrounds - God will always mix his people up... And we will always be challenged by it.

This was what the church in Corinth had to learn. Corinth was a well-off city, right in the centre of the trading routes across Europe and Greece,

the church included a huge variety of people of very different status in that society, and the Christians were taking their societal values into the church. Paying more attention to the rich. Showing off their spiritual gifts and judging one another on how seemingly spiritual they were - in other words evaluating one another as they would do outside the church. The gifts of the spirit thus became a sign of status. They were 'Lording it' over one another.

And so, Paul writes to them *'there are varieties of gifts but the same spirit, there are varieties of the service but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities but it is the Lord who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.'* There is no person greater or lesser in the eyes of the Lord. There is simply difference. One spiritual gift or another does not display a particular standing or favour with God. There is diversity in unity. All is for all.

This is the remarkable, incredible nature of the church. That people bring into the church their natural skills and abilities, experience and talents and, I pray, offer them in the service of God - but when people turn their hearts to God and make that decision to follow Christ and ask God to fill them afresh with his Holy Spirit then they are also given gifts - grace gifts - beyond their natural selves, which have no relation to their standing in the world - gifts to encourage, to edify, to build, to enable, to discern direction. Gifts to draw the people of God closer to God.

These are not gifts to be laid aside as unwanted, they cannot be returned to God and swapped for another. There are those among us who bring wisdom, knowledge, faith, the gift of healing, the gift of prophetic insight to our life together. There are those who pray in the Spirit. What I would say is - let us pray to be filled again with God's Holy Spirit, receive what he gives us and use those gifts - for the good of the whole.

Alongside the gifts is the call of God to various kinds of ministry or service and the prompting of God to undertake various activities or deeds, good works as they are sometimes known. Again, let's be attentive to how God is calling us or prompting us, as individuals. What is God moving you or me to do or to be. These promptings are not to be laid aside as unwanted either, they cannot be returned to the shop and exchanged for one we feel more comfortable with. They are to be explored, worked with and acted upon. They are part of God's wider plan for his church and each one of us is part of it.

How God gifts us and uses us is for the good of the whole and can only be known when we are part of a whole. This is not about individual standing or glory or recognition. Church is something that we co-create, our ministry to one another and to God's people in the world is something that we bring about together. What we are called to be or to do is not for our own reward but to benefit the whole church expressing Christ in the world.

And one of the ways in which we are church is remembering that we are a little dot in a huge pixelated picture full of other dots. In this parish this begins with understanding that we are three churches - working together forming a ministry for the whole parish. This afternoon there is a joint service with Hugglescote churches together to mark the week of prayer for Christian unity. You have the burning bush leaflet ... Coalville churches praying together. This is our calling too and cannot be neglected. To be part of a bigger whole.

Being church is an exciting, challenging, mad, wonderful journey. It takes some doing and it involves us all. It is not a passive activity. It will not always be comfortable - but it can be joyful. The Holy Spirit equips us to be Christ's very body in this place - let us pray for the Spirit to stir us up once more.