

1 Corinthians 12.1-20 'Make disciples': using spiritual gifts
All Saints', Preston-on-Tees 19 October 2008

Aim: using what the Spirit gives is a vital part of our individual and collective maturity.

I'd like to begin this sermon on 1 Corinthians 12 by reading something from Ephesians 4...! We are preaching through Ephesians at Stockton Parish Church at the moment, and this week we have been looking at Ephesians 4, which interestingly is very similar to this passage.

In Ephesians 4.11 Paul writes this:

(Ephesians 4.11) [God] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, (12) to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (13) until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

He's talking there about different leadership gifts, but this is the important point for us all. Why does God give different leadership gifts to different people? *To prepare God's people for works of service.* Why does he want that? *So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach (1) **unity** in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and (2) become **mature**, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

Why does the Holy Spirit give gifts? To build us up in *unity* and in *maturity*.

Faith (1-3)

The title of this talk is 'making disciples: using spiritual gifts.' As a church we are committed to our growth, individually and together. To grow and mature in unity, we need to exercise the gifts God gives us by his Spirit for that very purpose.

Now, you all may think I'm talking about supernatural 'powers' of healing, or prophecy. But I'm not—yet. You see, the most important spiritual gift, the most important gift that the Holy Spirit gives, is not speaking in tongues, or prophecy, or healing, or any of those things.

In v1-3 Paul says this:

(1) Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. (2) You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. (3) Therefore I tell you that no-one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no-one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.

The most important gift the Spirit gifts is our faith, our belief *and trust* in Jesus as our Lord. Recognising that Jesus is Lord is absolutely vital, and it is the most important gift that the Spirit gives. In all our thinking about spiritual gifts, we must remember that simple fact.

But we must also remember that Paul does not stop there. If that recognition is how we are *born* as Christians, then what Paul goes on to say about the gifts of the Spirit is how we grow up. If that recognition is the *foundation* of our church, then what Paul goes on to say is how the building is built.

So: if this is our birth, our foundation, what does the rest look like? Again, if you thought Paul was going to go straight into talking about tongues and prophecy, you'd be wrong again!

Unity (4-7)

In v4-7 Paul explains that to each one of us God gives the same Spirit. We all serve the same Lord (remember that the Spirit equips the saints for works of service). We all work for the same God, as the same God works in each of us.

To ‘each one’ of us is given ‘the manifestation of the Spirit’. This is not about ‘super-Christians’, although it may often feel like that in a charismatic church, especially if people around are having pretty visible manifestations. But they don’t have any more or less of the Holy Spirit than others, who are more quiet. God gives the Spirit to *all* his children.

At the heart of what the Spirit gives, then, is unity. God is one, we are one. The gifts of the Spirit should not divide, but unite. We all have the same Spirit—but we are not all supposed to be identical. How boring would that be!

Diversity (4-11)

We are all given life and faith and the Spirit by God. This is our birth, our foundation. We are all given the manifestation of the Spirit, but it is not the same for everyone.

Paul lists here, and elsewhere, gifts of: wisdom, knowledge, faith (that is, particularly strong faith—of course we are all given faith when we believe!), healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation, preaching, administration, teaching, pastoring, hospitality, giving. It is not supposed to be an exhaustive list, but some examples.

Notice the mix between supernatural gifts of (e.g.) healing and miracles, and the ‘practical’ gifts of (e.g.) administration and hospitality. The word ‘spiritual’ doesn’t mean that the gifts of the Spirit have nothing to do with the physical practicalities of life. It means that they come from the ‘Spirit’. Perhaps it would be helpful to read this passage with a capital ‘S’ for the word ‘Spiritual’.

One of the key verses in this passage is v11: *All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.*

These gifts are just that: gifts. They are not our own abilities, things that we could do without the Spirit. (Although of course God also uses and heightens our natural abilities—which he made, after all!—so we can serve him better.) And these gifts are not for ourselves, for our own glory. They are

for the building up of the church, to the glory of God. As we saw from Ephesians, God gives different gifts to different people so that the church may grow to full maturity in Christ.

The Body (14-20)

We need each other. God gives us all different gifts, and each of us has different gifts at different times in our lives. For a while you might have a gift of healing, or wisdom. Or you might go through all your life with the gift of administration. Whatever, we need each other.

That is why Paul uses the metaphor of a body in v14-20. It would be ridiculous for a foot to decide that it didn't belong to the body because it was not a hand. Equally, an ear couldn't say it wasn't part of the body, just because it isn't an eye.

You may feel that you are an unimportant member of this church, or at least less value by God than others. But that is absolutely not true. If you think that, you need to listen to what Paul is saying here. A body is not made up of eyes. Nor is it made up of feet. It has only two eyes and two feet, and a whole host of other bits as well. Like hair. (Well, most of us..!)

As we saw at the beginning, God gives his Spirit to all of us. We all have different manifestations, different gifts, but they all come from the same Spirit. Whether you serve coffee, or stand up here and preach, you are equally vital to the life of the church. I'm not just saying that. Paul says it right here, in v18: *But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*

God wants each of us to take our place in the body, to serve him in the way he wants, to use the gifts he gives us.

Discernment

So, how do we know what God wants us to do? How do we find out what gifts we have, in order to use them?

As I said before, God can and does use and heighten the gifts he gave us when he made us. That may be a sunny personality that is ideal for hospitality, and helping people feel welcome. It may be a musical talent, or the ability to make lots of cups of tea. It may be a gift of enthusiasm and support.

God does not want us all to be the same—he makes and values our difference, and he will use them, our personality and

natural abilities. So one way of discerning how God wants you to serve, is by looking at what he has already given you, and seeing how that might fit with the church.

But also, God wants us to grow, to mature—and that means learning new things, being given new gifts, new ministries. This should be something we are always open to, as we pray, and as we listen to other peoples' suggestions to us. If you are considering this, or maybe have felt prompted during this talk, come and talk to someone about it.

Part of our job as ordained ministers is to help and enable God's children to find their place in the body, to exercise their gifts, so we can all grow together in maturity.

We began with Ephesians 4, and we'll end with it, because it is the supreme expression of the way we must and will grow in unity and maturity, together in Christ.

(Ephesians 4.14) Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves... (15) Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. (16) From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.