

Readings: 1 Corinthians 12

We’ve learned already that we share a common identity as the body of Christ.

And that we also share a common purpose as the body of Christ.

Together we have been given the same Holy Spirit who anointed Jesus at his baptism.

It’s the same Holy Spirit Jesus spoke about at the synagogue of his hometown Nazareth when he said

“the spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Together as the body of Christ now on earth, we share the same mission, to share the good news of Jesus and of his kingdom to the poor, to those trapped or sick or oppressed.

We share a common identity, we share a common purpose as the body of Christ.

Last week we learned about the way the holy spirit enables us to live holy lives for Jesus . It’s not about us simply trying to be good but about walking in step with the spirit, in his direction, in his footsteps, in his empowering – that we might see the fruit of the spirit grow in us.

This week we are reminding ourselves of the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to each Christian - each Christian.

But though we have a common identity and a common purpose, we each have a different function:

⁴There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. ⁵There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. ⁶There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service. ⁷The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all...

Our function as different parts of the body of Christ is enabled by God giving us different abilities described here by Paul as charisma, which means ‘graces’, or the nearest we can get to it, ‘gifts’.

Paul gives us three lists of gifts of the spirit: in Romans 12, in 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4. None of the list is exhaustive and many of them, which is no surprise of course, are seen in Jesus himself.

Here are some of them on the screen. You’ll see that some of these we identify readily with our natural talents and some of them we would identify as more supernatural.

Paul says: “Now, concerning what you wrote about the gifts from the Holy Spirit. I want you to know the truth about them, my friends”

and here are some of the key truths he gives us:

- 1 spiritual gifts are given to each Christian – they may be the same as our natural talents but somehow they are distinctively from God to help us to show Jesus to the world in the way we live as the church and in the way we serve.
- 2 We are not all the same, we do not have the same function
- 3 but each part is vital, just as each piece of a jigsaw is vital, each person also needs to play the part God intends us to if the body of Christ is not to be “disabled” in some way.
- 4 We are also to want more of the gifts God has for us. 1 Corinthians 14:1 “follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.”

So if we know what our gifts are, it is important that we use them. And if we don't know then it's important that we find out. And even if we do know and are using our gifts it's likely that God may have more for us! so we are invited to ask and try to find out.

- 5 The gifts are all to be used in love. I'm sure it's no coincidence that 1 Corinthians 13 all about love is the sandwich filling between chapters 12 and 14 about spiritual gifts.

But it is a real puzzle.

The church has had a dilemma through history. I have a dilemma. We have a dilemma.

We are happy enough to ask God for gifts of the spirit and to use those that we feel safe with – and it's important that we do.

But we are nervous about asking God for those gifts of the spirit which we feel a bit less safe with because we understand them less, because they feel beyond us, because they are more obviously in the spiritual realm...

Alison Morgan in her great little book “Doing what Jesus did... A fresh look at the gifts of the Spirit” writes this

“the Spirit brings life, life in all its fullness – but also has a way of turning things upside down and inside out, of threatening the status quo.... [so that] Imperceptibly the church (through history) moved gradually further and further from the edgy, dangerous faith of the first Christians...”

It is true that encouraging these gifts of the Spirit can be troublesome when imperfect human beings get to try them out.

It's clear that the Corinthian church was misusing them which was why that Paul had to write them as he did.

Among their failings was an air of superiority that had arisen from those who were given and used the supernatural gifts.

It would also appear that their church meetings had also become chaotic and unloving.

That's why Paul here urges them to remember that every person is important, every gift used is valuable, even the less spectacular ones. He goes on to explain that their worship services should be orderly; that the Holy Spirit does not take us over; that it is still ourselves who choose to allow the Holy Spirit's graces to work through us.

Why else might it be that the use of the spiritual gifts has caused such division?

Perhaps it is because we are more at home with our physical selves than our spiritual selves. Almost certain it is harder to discern what is of God and what is our own imagination which means we often make mistakes...

Perhaps we use them selfishly. Bishop Tom Wright remarks “the Holy Spirit and his gifts are not to provide us with the spiritual equivalent of a trip to Alton Towers (which we know can be quite a dangerous rollercoaster anyway) but so that we might take the victory of the cross into the world.”

There are a few people who would claim that all of these supernatural gifts stopped at the end of Acts of the Apostles. But there is nothing at all in the Bible to suggest that they should be. Nor is that the experience of the church through history - indeed the churches that are growing rapidly across the world right now are those churches who choose to allow these gifts to be used. And I can testify myself to the benefit of Christian brothers and sisters who have used their gifts of healing, of speaking in tongues, of sharing special words or pictures from God.

But, if our purpose as the body of Christ is to bring the kingdom of God in and to live as Jesus lived on earth and we believe the scriptures, that God has given us a variety of tools to enable us to do this... What should we say to him?

When it is the God of love who has given us the tools to do this and also asks us to ask him for more, then what should we say to God?

Thank you God for this electric jigsaw, drill, and welding kit.

I'd really rather stick with my junior hacksaw, my brand all and pritt stick.

Or in another image, “no Lord, we would really rather hop everywhere rather than run; we would much rather have to wear glasses rather than have good eyesight...”

I'd pray that as this church, this part of the body of Christ, you and I have the courage to explore these issues, but that we do so very very carefully – **in love**.

And that we do so with peaceful hearts, not fearful ones, nor fearful of one another, nor fearful of the God who has given us these gifts, of the God who wants us to be one with Jesus who used so many of them.

If you'd like to explore a bit more about your own gifts then I have put some copies of a simple starter gift questionnaire at the back of church – the same one that we used last October. And come back to church over the next three weeks where we are learning a little more about some of the more obviously supernatural gifts of the Spirit.

And with that plea to lovingly and gently explore these important biblical issues, I leave the last word to Saint Paul himself in efficient chapter 4 at the end of one of his passages about unity and the body of Christ and use of gifts: he urges us to...

Speak the truth in love, so that we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him at the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and built itself up in love, as each part does its work.