

June 21st 2015 (Gifts of wisdom, prophecy, tongues, knowledge...)

Readings: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13; and 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 and 26-33

When you look upstream on the beautiful River Teign you realise that the water keeps on coming, and is always coming to refresh. Reminds me every time of Paul saying the love of God is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that he has given us in Romans chapter 5.

And on my walk there last week, I also saw some delightful great tit chicks on their first outing -chicks who a few days earlier would have been stuck in their nest, instinctively opening their beaks wide in complete trust as their parent arrived with food. “open wide your mouth and I will fill it” says the psalmist.

God always has more for us if we will open ourselves up to him to receive it. It’s all over the place in the Bible:

Ephesians chapter 1: I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Or in Ephesians chapter 3 Paul prays that you ...may have power.. to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,— that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Two images:

the tumbling ever flowing river Teign and the trusting baby chick mouth open wide.

And there is a third image of this Gazanea plant. It has wonderful orange flowers but only open fully when the sun is shining on them. when the sun moves away the petals close tightly.

Sharing these because it is very much on my heart that we each and together learn more about the Holy Spirit:

- living in step with the Holy Spirit,
- knowing the love and power and refreshment of the Holy Spirit, and
- learning to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I’m not sharing this because I am trying to get God to do anything in particular with us or among us but I do know he always has more for us and that he needs us to have open hands, open minds and open hearts to receive.

He needs us to be like the good Gazanea always open to the sun and not with petals or hands clasped closed so that we cannot receive the Son’s illumination.

And so we have these few weeks of teaching about the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Last week we learnt about how we share a common identity as members together in the body of Christ, baptised by the one Spirit.

we learnt about how we share a common purpose, sharing the same Holy Spirit’s anointing, sharing in the same mission of Jesus to bring the good news of his kingdom to the world.

Yet we learnt how we each have a different function within that body. We each are given different gifts, or more correctly that the church is given a great diversity of gifts and we are meant to use them!

They are not given for our personal blessing but for growing the kingdom... Alison Morgan writes "they are not a party bag but rather a toolkit".

And there are a whole range of gifts that we have been given. Last October we offered the gifts that we knew we had to God in a wonderful, moving, harvest service when we hung little luggage labels on trees if you remember.

But we are going to look briefly today at some of the more obviously supernatural gifts of the spirit –today a brief look at prophecy, words of knowledge, speaking in tongues...and in two weeks time a look at healing

And as soon as I say these things you may feel very suspicious like Nathaniel in our bible reading from John's gospel "can anything good come from these charismatic gifts". But I hope and pray that in openness and trust of one another, in openness to God's word, that we might as Philip says to Nathaniel "come and see".

First thing to note is that many of the gifts of the spirit that are mentioned by Paul here in one Corinthians we clearly see in Jesus: e.g.

- Gift of miraculous powers? the loaves and fish feeding 5000
- Gift of Healing – where do you begin?!
- Discerning spirits – definitely, think about afflicted people like Legion
- and in this encounter with Nathaniel in today's reading, Jesus appears to display what Paul might describe as "a message of knowledge"

In the same way he knows about the marriage history of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, He seems to know something about Nathaniel and his character without having ever met him:

"here is a true Israelite who is sincere, or in whom nothing is false".

And although it is not on one of Paul's lists of gifts or graces or charisma, Jesus appears to have pictorial knowledge or insight into Nathaniel's life when he explains to him that "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you".

It may seem a bit odd to be saying that Jesus was able to do things like this because he was filled with the Holy Spirit because he is divine after all! And that is true.

But at the same time, when we hear Jesus also saying in John 14:12 I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these..."

how else will we do them if it is not by the power of the Holy Spirit of God, living in us? Which, however extraordinary and mysterious and humbling it is, it should come as no surprise that St Paul explains that some of these divine supernatural graces of God are also able to be received and used by us.

And isn't just Jesus, and it isn't just the Corinthian church. I have had the privilege of knowing how other Christians have learned to use some of these sorts of gifts.

It's a gift that has been particularly valuable for Ruth and I as we have discerned God's call on our lives. Two people came to dinner once and said that they felt they had had a word from God for us that we were "living in a tent" and not likely to stay in our house for very long – a house we had stayed in for 10 years. And indeed about a year later we were at theological college.

At that time someone who did not know I was exploring ordination, came up to me in church one day and said that they felt they had a picture of me standing at the front of a Viking boat leading a group of people not of soldiers but of Christians. The lady asked me whether I had ever felt that God was calling me to lead a church.

These people did not know these words or pictures were definitely from God, but they risked trying it, slowly learning to perceive what was likely to be from God, and what was simply their imagination..and on these occasions, it appears that they were of God...

So if you feel that God gives you a picture or message for somebody in church whilst you are praying then can I encourage you to share that with them providing it is something that is encouraging or helpful and that it is always couched in the language that this may be for you and it may be from God...

How about the gift of tongues?

Tongues is simply a technical phrase for a form of prayer language. Sometimes it can be a different human language as it appears to be in Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost. But often that is not the case. I know of its value in personal prayer as Paul alludes to in 1 Corinthians 14:2 and I wonder whether it is one of the ways that the Holy Spirit prays in us with groans that words cannot express as Paul writes in Romans chapter 8.

It seems that our cry in prayer is expressed not in a language that we understand but coming deeply from our spirit. It's nothing new either – nor just a Pentecostal church phenomenon: Francis of Assisi in the 13th century and Ignatius of Loyola, the man who began the Jesuits in the 16th century all apparently spoke in tongues.

I have been in a couple of situations where whole congregations are encouraged to use their gifts of singing in tongues –I found it a beautiful angelic sound. And yet in the corporate situation, however lovely it might be, Paul appears to counsel against it. The Corinthian church was clearly getting too carried away with using this gift to the extent that their worship was disorderly and that people were being hurt... perhaps by simply feeling left out if they had not been given that particular gift...

Which is why Paul sees it primarily as a useful gift to use in public if someone is able to interpret what was said i.e. translate what has been said for then it can be of a prophetic value to the whole church.

So while I would encourage you to ask to be able to speak or pray in a god-given prayer language to help your own prayer life, but to remember that it is no more important than other gifts, and needs to be used carefully in public situations.

How about prophecy? words from God directed to a particular situation

The new Testament actually teaches that we may all prophesy – but that some people may be especially called to be prophets. Prophecy is welcomed by Paul where it encourages, or consoles but it is clear it always needs testing, and as we read today needs to be done in an orderly way.

And yet it is something that seems to have a lower profile in the church today. As Jane Williams, wife of Archbishop Rowan once said “we have lost a great deal through fear of finding the Holy Spirit at work without our authorisation!” Certainly, I have very little experience of it being used in churches – though someone did really sense God calling them to start a gospel choir after the music in worship weekend – so watch this space!

And many institutions or programs have begun in churches after a prayerful consideration of a word of prophecy.. I wonder what God may be saying to us here?

Well, a whistle stop tour of information about the way in which Jesus and the church have used different gifts of the spirit. If you’d like to know more please do ask me to point you to some books that may help. But as I said at the beginning, my main intention today was to share that we do not seek out any one of the particular gifts or set of gifts that **we want**; but that we are open to receive what God may have given me, you, us, as Graces for us here and now. If we can know more clearly what gifts he has given us as a church here, we may well be able to discern better how he wants us to serve him here.

Shall we “come and see”...be open to receive. Let’s do as Paul says in one Corinthians “follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts... But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

How open to the sun are you feeling right now?

How eager are you to be filled with the Holy Spirit, as Paul urges us

How thirsty are you for more of God’s love and more of God’s power in our lives?

To enable him to use the gifts he’s already given you more effectively?

To Receive and try out the gifts you have yet to discover?

Jesus says “if anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within them.” Come Holy Spirit and fill us afresh...