

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” 1 Corinthians 12:7.

Today is the third Sunday of this period of focus on Stewardship, and the theme designated is TALENT.

I am not going to exhort you to consider your talents and gifts and urge you to make time to do service for the church. Indeed, no. That is John Hugo's job. Instead today I want to look at three separate but interwoven points: first, that all of us have gifts of the spirit, but very often don't recognize them in ourselves; second, we do not acquire these talents through our own efforts – they are gifts, in the sense that God gives them to us; and third, we are not blessed with gifts for our own selfish benefit, but to fulfill the task God has given us – building his kingdom on earth.

I'd like to begin with the reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where he is discussing Spiritual Gifts. What is particularly interesting to me is verse 4: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people.” First, what strikes me is the use of different words for gifts: “service” and “working”. Many of us tend to think of working as something separate from the church – a job is different to having spiritual gifts. I mean, how can the gift of speaking in tongues or interpreting tongues come in handy when you're a plumber? Or prophecy, when you're a childminder? The gift of faith seems to be a very spiritual gift – not useful when filling in administrative forms. By the same token, how can one be a plumber in the service of the Lord? How can God work through someone behind the till in a supermarket? How can my job be a spiritual gift? This approach to spiritual gifts is confusing.

And this is because of our failure to consider what a spiritual gift is. Paul's repetition is not only to indicate that we need to understand gifts more broadly as work, as service. He also repeats that all gifts are from the Spirit, from the Lord, from God, in a beautiful Trinity. In other words, talents are specifically those gifts, those jobs, given to us by the Spirit. In verse 7, Paul goes on to say: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given.” Now this is a glorious description of gifts – “manifestations of the Spirit”. What more are these gifts and talents, what more is our service to God, but the Holy Spirit shining through us, rather like magnificent stained glass windows?

We are all filled with the Holy Spirit at baptism, again at confirmation and we call to the Holy Spirit to fill us at Pentecost and throughout our worship. And what is the Holy Spirit but the spirit of love? So instead of trying to reflect on gifts and service and work, let us instead think of ways in which the Holy Spirit can manifest herself through us. (I'd like to say “herself” – especially for those who have read *The Shack*.) In our Old Testament reading, we see David with the Spirit shining through his music, bringing Saul relief from spiritual torment – yes,

David has a musical gift, but is this not the spirit of peace, the peace the world cannot give? If we read Paul's letters, we see that whenever we are merciful, compassionate, kind, patient, humble, generous, whenever we choose the truth, when we choose hope, whenever we choose to endure and have faith – then we are shining with the gifts of the Spirit.

Of course, the way the Spirit shines through each of us will be different - and "each one" of us (as Paul says) will have something to offer, no matter how useless we may feel. In the parable of the labourers, the landowner doesn't just take the strongest workers - those assertive young guys who run to the bakkie and leap on the back - and be done with it. He goes back, hour after hour, to find others who want to work – I imagine these would be the older guys, already bowed down and worn out from years of backbreaking manual labour. These would be the elderly, the sick, or even the disabled, workers that any employer would reject immediately, as not being able to do a day's work and earn their one denarius. As the day passes, the group of men will grow evermore dejected, knowing that their family will be hungry that night. But no, our master takes everyone who is willing, at whatever point in their lives, with whatever challenges they've faced, and gives them a chance to work in his vineyard, and all enjoy the same rewards, the gift of eternal life.

John Milton's famous poem "On his blindness" speaks of this, of a man with an inner drive to carry out what he believes is the gift God has given him. Instead, through the cruel fate of blindness, he feels he is unable to serve God. The answer he receives is that:

"God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

The polar opposite, perhaps, of feeling we have nothing to offer God is believing we know best how the Spirit ought to manifest in us and what outcomes our gifts should have – this is all about following the devices and desires of our own hearts and brings me to the second point. We do not acquire gifts of the spirit through our own efforts – they are gifts, in the sense that God gives them to us. This is what the workers in the parable today were unable to understand. It is not through our own efforts or merits, our hard work in the sun of the vineyard, that we earn our the denarius of salvation. No, all we can do is make ourselves available as workers.

This also suggests of course that we cannot choose our gifts. Paul reminds us that God will give us the gifts we need to best serve Him. As Milton found, they may not be the gifts we choose, or that may be most glamorous or convenient, but they will be the gifts God made us, indeed uniquely created each of us, to

undertake. I don't imagine Moses really wanted to lead the Israelites out of Egypt despite that snazzy trick of being able to turn a stick into a snake, or that Jonah wanted to go to Nineveh, even if he survived a ride in a whale. But once they made themselves available to God, they were given the gifts they needed to carry out the tasks God gave them to build his kingdom.

One of my favourite stories of gifts is that of Julian of Norwich, the medieval anchoress, who prayed for the gift of three wounds – the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion and the wound of longing for Christ. Note that she didn't ask for the gifts of contrition, compassion and longing for Christ: she asked for wounds. Why? What Julian of Norwich is reminding us is that it is a wounded spirit, not a proud one, that can accept salvation. When we are humble and broken, disappointed at not being chosen to work, when we are in the belly of the whale, or wandering in the desert, so to speak, then we are able to make ourselves available to God; when we realize our own frailty and inadequacy and know that indeed we are unable to offer God anything of our own, as John Milton did, we are then able to accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit and will be given all we need. And once we are filled with the spirit, service will overflow from us

As the psalmist says in our psalm for today, we cannot prosper without having our roots in the living waters of the spirit, drawing nourishment from God's word. And at the same time, it is through this looking to God that our spiritual gifts will become evident, and that our spiritual gifts will bear abundant fruit.

And this brings me to my final point: we are not blessed with gifts for our selfish benefit, but to fulfill the task God has given us – “to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given **for the common good**.” In fact, today's reading from Corinthians ends with the famous references to the parts of the body, each having a task to do to achieve the work of the body of Christ.

The workers in the parable today were unable to consider working together for the common good – they were bitter towards the workers who came later and who had not endured the heat of the sun all day. They did not rejoice that all of those who had waited for work together had made enough to feed their families. They believed that their superior efforts deserved superior rewards. This approach to effort and reward is a worldly one, it is part of the foolishness mentioned in the first chapter of Corinthians – God's foolishness is wiser than man's wisdom. We cannot work in God's vineyard with an attitude of pride and self-congratulation, as if we are the owners of the vineyard - imagine. Instead, we need to humbly celebrate as more workers join us, that they came to the vineyard before the end of the day and still had a chance to work. We need to be joyful that the others have arrived and the harvest can therefore be gathered. And we need to be able to serve God, alongside our fellow workers, without considering the rewards, as St Ignatius does:

**Lord, teach me to be generous.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve;
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labor and not to ask for reward,
save that of knowing that I do your will.**

I invite you all in the name of the Holy Spirit to come and labour beside me in the vineyard that is Christ Church.