

He gave gifts to people - Serving Sunday

Date: 24 November 2024 - Christ the King

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 35:30-36:7; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Has anyone ever heard of the town of Geel? I first heard about this town earlier this year when Amy and I attended a Church Mental Health Summit. Geel has the world's longest running mental health ministry. The story goes back to the 7th century to an Irish princess Dymphna. Her mum died and her father's grief led to his mental breakdown to the point where he wanted to marry his daughter. She fled to the village of Geel to escape and built a hospice to care for the poor and sick in the area. Tragically her father tracked her down and killed her.

Dymphna's story continued to be passed down orally, until the 13th century, when she was canonised as the patron Saint of "those suffering with mental illness". In the Christian tradition of pilgrimage, people who were mentally unwell began to travel to Geel from all over Europe to pray in the Church of Saint Dymphna. Also in the pilgrimage tradition, local people started opening their homes and their dinner tables to show hospitality and accommodate these pilgrims. That ministry continues to this day, 700 years later, with a modern psychiatric centre at the heart of the town, and patients still staying with residents. It's a wonderful example of the impact the church can have following Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself.

This sermon isn't about care for those with mental health issues, that's for another day. Rather, I tell this story as an example of what God is doing through his church in this world. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden ... [so] let your light shine before all men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."¹ A recent report found that nearly 40% of Tasmanians were served by the church last year. And that was only based on a survey from only 45% of churches and faith based organisations in Tassie.² The Church is the greatest volunteer organisation on earth. Through the Church we encounter God's love and light in Jesus. Through the Church we learn how to be disciples of Jesus - how to love God and love our neighbour. As the Church we're sent out to be salt and light.

And you get to be a part of that. Through the church, you get to be a part of the body of Christ, God's presence in this world. Through the church, you get to be a part of what God is doing in the world. Through the church, you can make a difference, even here at St George's.

Today we're looking at one of Paul's favourite metaphors for the Church - the body of Christ. He uses this picture to describe the Church in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. He writes:

¹ Matthew 5.14-15

² Nayba Impact Audit Tasmania.

https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/605a24976279286069786c34/65ee0102aff715b49a4e2c39_TASMANIA%20STATEWIDE%20REPORT%20MARCH%202024%20-%20NAYBA%20-%20FINAL.pdf

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, **5** so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. **6** We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.³

Paul uses the picture of the body to make several points. All the parts of the body are different. But they all belong to each other. So, we're all different and we all have different gifts, but that doesn't make us superior or inferior to others. Likewise we need each other in the body, we can't go it alone. But the point I want to make this morning is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:7

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

The Holy Spirit has given each of us gifts. He wants you to use those gifts to serve the common good. This morning I just want to explore briefly. (1) The Gifts of the Spirit & (2) The Common Good.

Gifts of the Spirit

As soon as we hear that phrase "the gifts of the Spirit" my guess is that most of us think about the more supernatural gifts of the Spirit like those Paul lists here in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 - healing, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues. For the Corinthians, such obviously supernatural gifts were part and parcel of the Christian life. But they had become a matter of competition to the neglect of the deeper and universal call of Christ and work of the Spirit to love one another.

One of the things I love about St George's is our diversity. We come from all sorts of different church backgrounds, not to mention different cultures and languages. The temptation for some of us may be to dismiss these supernatural gifts entirely. For you the challenge may be that you need to wake up and see that God is at work amongst us by his Spirit here and now. Some of us do speak in tongues. I certainly pray for healing when I visit people and we often pray for healing for members of the parish in our Morning Prayer time on Zoom - which you're welcome to come to by the way!

But are these supernatural gifts the only gifts of the Spirit? There are a number of different lists of gifts of the Spirit in the New Testament, and none of them is exhaustive. But you may be surprised to learn that in these some very un-miraculous gifts are included. Things like serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, showing mercy,⁴ even administration.⁵ Administration sounds entirely unspiritual, but I can tell you that church life needs administration. Without the administrative gifts that Amy brings to our ministry team, we'd be a mess!

For our last example, let's look at 2 people from the Old Testament that you've probably never heard of Bezalel and Oholiab. We met them in our reading from Exodus 35.

Did you notice what Moses said? It was through the Spirit that Bezalel and Oholiab were given wisdom, understanding, knowledge and all kinds of skills. Their job was to use these gifts to design and build the Tabernacle, that sacred tent where God would meet with his people. What's more,

³ Romans 12.4-6

⁴ Romans 12:6-8

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12.28

through the Spirit they were given the ability to teach others - to pass on those skills to others. And so in the next chapter we find Bezalel and Oholiab leading a huge team of skilled artists and craftspeople.

I love this picture. Here are two consummate artists. Their skill and creativity is a gift of the Spirit. They put these gifts to work in building a beautiful space for people to worship God. And they train others, passing on their craft and wisdom, as they go. This too is the gift of the Spirit.

Artistic skill. Healing. Prophecy. Speaking in tongues. Serving. Even administration and everything in between. They are all gifts of the Spirit. In fact whatever gift or ability you have, is a gift of the Spirit. What's more, even if you don't think you have a gift, what does Paul say? To *each one* the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To each one. Even you.

Common Good

But what if you don't know what your gift is? Who hasn't asked that? To answer that question we first need to ask, What are the gifts of the Spirit *for*? That brings us to point 2, *For the Common Good*.

What does Paul say, *to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*. Peter puts it like this: *Each one should use whatever gift they have received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.*⁶

Or again, in Ephesians, Paul puts it like this: *From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*⁷

The Spirit has given each of us gifts. As we use them to serve others, playing our part in the body, so the body will grow. That is each member will grow and we together will grow. That's the common good.

Today is serving Sunday. We're hearing about all sorts of different ways you can serve at church. Prayer, cleaning, welcoming, counting the collection, serving morning tea, leading Kids Church, serving communion, praying, playing music, reading the Bible, leading Bible study, doing the flowers, visiting the sick, praying, doing maintenance, working in the garden, preaching, sharing their faith, Alpha. And did I mention praying? All are vital. None is more important than another. We only grow as each part does its work.

That idea of the *common good* though does not need to be limited to church. It spills over to the rest of society. The question is, how can I serve the common good, the good of my neighbour, my community, maybe even my country or the world, with the gifts the Holy Spirit has given me? Those gifts may include where you were born, what family you grew up in, what education you received, what opportunities you were given, what training you've received, but also how you're wired, what

⁶ 1 Peter 4.10

⁷ Ephesians 4.16

gets you excited. We can think of people like William Wilburforce dedicating his life to the abolition of slavery. Or Martin Luther King campaigning for civil rights.

While you can serve the common good both inside and outside the church, it's in the church that you'll learn the character that you will need to deploy the gifts you've been given in service. The body grows as each member uses their gifts, but those gifts only soar to their full potential when they are offered in love. They can only find their true use when they are offered in humble service. We learn to do this as we come together and encounter Jesus, the Lord of love who poured out his life in humble service on cross for you and for me.

Gifts are nothing without a heart of love. And so the question is not what are my gifts? But what are the needs around me and how can I serve in my current life package? As you ask those questions and begin to serve here at church, then the Holy Spirit will equip you and show the gifts he has given. It's ok to have a go and work out that you're not gifted in a certain area. Try something else. The Spirit is using all these things to shape your character. But you won't discover his gifts if you don't serve. Age or ability are not a barrier. I read on Facebook a lovely post by our bishop about his mum. She's in her nursing home, chatting and praying with other downcast and lonely residents and organising with carers a monthly trip to her church with others for worship.

To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

What are the needs you see? What do you enjoy doing? What is your availability? Get serving and you will begin to see the Holy Spirit at work in you, and find the joy it is to serve our King and his world for the common good.