

Sermon – 1Corinthians12: 1-11

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

It's been an interesting week since last Sunday when I preached on the Baptism of our Lord and how we can all have a role in bringing people to Jesus. This week, we've had the stories of rising Covid cases, and most of us now know at least one person who has come down with the latest strain. We've had the ongoing drama of Novak Djokovic and whether or not he'll be playing tennis next week, and at the personal level, we've had stories of joy, accomplishment and disappointment, as our week unfolded, accompanied by God, in all our various gifts, ministries and actions.

It got me thinking about our diversity of life experience, which mirrors our diversity of God given gifts, and it led me straight to the reading today, found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12. And as I surveyed our lectionary for the next three weeks leading into our Vision Day, I was delighted to see chapters 12 and 13. So today we embark on a mini sermon series about the diversity of our gifts, given by God, about our interdependence on each other as the body of Christ and lastly, on the Sunday before our Vision Day, we'll explore chapter 13 which is Paul's vision for the body of Christ, that everything we do, all of our ministries, are framed by love. So today let's look at the first 11 verses of chapter 12 of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

To start with, let's put the letter in context. According to chapter 18 of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul visited Corinth after Athens and stayed for 18 months. During this time, he established the church there, initially from the

Jewish community but later, after he started getting in trouble with the Jewish leaders, converting gentiles, or non-Jews who predominantly worshipped the gods of Greek mythology. Corinth was a seaport, a wealthy centre of trade and commerce with ancient origins, but by then it was established as the Roman capital in Greece. It was cosmopolitan and liberal, with a diversity of life styles and religious beliefs. Perhaps, not dissimilar culturally, to Melbourne and surrounds!

Some years later, as the church in Corinth grew and divisions became known, Paul had recourse to write them a series of pastoral letters, two of which have survived and made it into the canon or scripture. The letters showcase Paul's theology, honed by years of missionary work, and chapter 12, which introduces the section up to chapter 14 on spiritual gifts, provides us with insight into how he viewed the character and life of the church. I think his writing, inspired by God, is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago.

So Paul clearly signals a new section of his letter with verse 1 saying "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed." In a very direct writing style, Paul clearly states, what he's going to talk about, to whom and why. He's not beating around the bush! It seems to me that he wants to make sure that all the community are informed about spiritual gifts. And he goes on to say that unlike the idols that they used to worship, who could not speak, God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - is actively involved in their lives for the common good. And this theme of the common good runs throughout the First Letter to the Corinthians.

But it's a challenge to keep us all focused on the common good and kingdom issues, isn't it, when we are all so different? In a few weeks, we'll be taking

some time out to discern God's vision for the future here in Lara and Little River. How do we build God's kingdom in this place, in this time? It will take many different gifts to do this. But fortunately as Paul points out in the next few verses there are indeed many God given gifts, all of which are necessary to do kingdom work, and none of them are superior or more important than the other. And from Paul's perspective, to be truly spiritual, is not to have some kind of other worldly, individual spiritualism. Paul's take on the spiritual is that it drives the individual into the life of the local church, the Christian community, as an expression of his or her commitment to Jesus as Lord.

So Paul goes on to say in verses 4 to 7: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Paul is quite clear that the triune God is the binding ingredient for our life in community. Yes, we are a diverse mob, but our unity is found in God.

So how does God underwrite our community and kingdom activities? By enabling the church, us, to embody Jesus' presence in the world in a whole variety of ways. Paul expects the church to provide a model of Christian community. The church is the means by which Jesus is uniquely present and distinctively expressed in the world. And in the church there is a rich diversity of both people and gifts. We, you and I, are the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the world. We are given gifts, we are given ministries, and we are given energy for service. And the Spirit produces results, noticeable results in changed lives, transformed relationships, released talents, effective testimony, growing congregations. These are for the common good and for

the building up of God's kingdom. And in the season of Epiphany, it's so relevant to talk about God's revelation within each and everyone of us, in the gifts and ministries that we are all called for.

Then Paul goes on to his list of spiritual gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. It's a similar list to other lists in Romans and Ephesians and Paul stresses that these gifts are given through the Spirit by the grace of God. If we are ourselves gifted, it is only by the grace of God that we have these gifts, and God's purpose is that these gifts be used for the building up of the kingdom, and for the common good.

This list of spiritual gifts written down 2000 years ago, is it still relevant today? As I pondered and prayed on this list, I couldn't help but think we need some of these gifts if we are to grow as a people of God here in Lara and Little River. As we head toward February 5th and our Vision Day, I am hoping that people with the gift of wisdom, or in the original Greek, *logos sophias*, a word of wisdom, come to make their contributions to our discernment of our future. Who amongst us is that thoroughly wise Christian who understands the wisdom of God and how that might differ from their own personal wisdom or opinion? Who amongst us have the gift to shed light on a confusing situation, to bring perspective on another, or provide a frame of reference in a third? This gift, this wisdom, is necessary as we confront the complex and dynamic world in which we live, here, today.

Somewhat related to wisdom is *logos gnoseos* or a word of knowledge. The Spirit manifests in some of us with the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus and the ability to speak it out. Who are those people who bring us back to

Jesus when we get distracted by worldly circumstances or philosophical debates? I want these people to be with us to highlight the truth of Jesus as we try to work out our future.

And we need the gift of faith. We need those people who can look through the immediacy of a given situation to that which is invisible and bring confidence that God will move in seemingly impossible situations. People with the gift of faith to boost our morale as we confront the reality of our situation: a small ageing parish, with declining numbers. I believe that God will indeed be with us as we look to reshape our vision and build God's kingdom here. God will give us the gifts and energy we need.

And we need the gift of healing. We all need healing. Too often the focus is on physical healing. I think the words of Hans Burki, a mid 20th century theologian are helpful. He writes "We become sick if a conflict becomes unbearable – the conflict between body and mind – between the conscious and the unconscious; between individual need and social integration; and between our temporal struggles and our eternal destiny." And I do think that the current situation with Covid is indicative of the struggle between individual need and social integration. It's something that we have been witnessing with our leaders as they struggle with public policy settings, and even with the situation of Novak Djokovic, where individual needs seem to be more important than the broader collective guidelines. Our world is struggling and needs healing, but healing is more than a medical solution, although we thank God for those as well!

Paul's list continues with miracles, prophesy, discernment of spirits, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. And he expands on prophesy and tongues

in chapter 14, if you would like to read more around this subject. But the key thing to note as Paul concludes this part of chapter 12 is “All these (gifts) are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.” The diversity of gifts is set in the unity of the Spirit. God chooses what gifts we or others have, so that none of us have either occasion for boasting or for a sense of inferiority. These gifts are a sign of the free grace of God by which we and the church exist.

So how do we apply this teaching to our situation? I think we all need to pray about our God given gifts, understanding how we are gifted, and bring them into the life of our church, particularly to our Vision Day which is coming up in 3 weeks’ time. We are all called to use our gifts for the life of our church and, as I look out upon you, I do see a gifted group of people. I see people with the gift of wisdom. I see people with the gift of knowledge and I see people with the gift of faith. Let’s use our gifts to build God’s kingdom here in Lara and Little River.

Let us pray.

Loving God, we give you thanks for the body of Christ here in Lara and Little River and for the variety of gifts given to us through the Holy Spirit. Guide and help us to know where our ministry will lead us this year. Help us to live fulfilling, joyful and loving lives as members of your body. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.