

## 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2023 – The People of God #8 ‘The Body – Gifted’ (1 Corinthians 12:1-13)

Back when we worshipped at a big church in London, probably about 20 years ago now, I remember a service one Sunday evening. Our church encouraged people to listen to God, and to discover spiritual gifts for themselves. During one song, I had a very strong sense that someone in the congregation had a problem with their left eye. I didn't know who, only a deep conviction that this was a need that could be addressed in prayer. So, I shared it with the service leader.

At the end of the service, as the leader was wrapping up, and inviting people to receive prayer if they wished, he mentioned that there may be someone present with a problem with their left eye – and if so, would they like to be prayed for before they left?

I thought no more about it – and went through to have the inevitable cup of post-service church coffee, and that was that. A week later, after the following Sunday's service, a young woman came rushing up to me, very excited. It turns out that she was the person who had a problem with her left eye, and she did come forward to receive prayer. The eye had been miraculously healed, and she had become a Christian that week. She had in fact been attending our church Alpha course, and this wonderful answer to prayer was the clincher.

It was a lovely encouragement – and also a wonderful example of how the church is meant to work. In this story at least five different gifts were involved: a word of knowledge, leadership, healing, also evangelism, as the initial contact was through the alpha course – plus the gift encouragement, as the young woman shared her story with all of us.

**In the family of God, the body of Christ, everybody gets to play.** Everyone has a part – and everyone can receive and use gifts, blessing each other and those around us.

Of all the New Testament images used to describe the people of God, the body is perhaps the most significant. It has a number of layers to it: first, it helps us to understand our deep connection to Christ. We are not just a body, we are the body of Christ. Christ is the head (Ephesians 1:22-23), and we are all connected to this head and directed by it. Just as a human body is dead without a head, so we derive our life from being connected to our divine head, the Lord Jesus.

Second, it is an image which reminds us that we are here to do Christ's work in the world. Now that Christ is ascended into heaven, we are his representatives here. The word Christian means 'little Christ', and we are all little Jesuses, literally his body here on earth. Or as St Teresa of Avila famously put it:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

So this body is a very active, dynamic image, it has a purpose – **we are here to do Christ's work – to be his hands, his feet, his eyes, filled with his Spirit.**

But there is yet a third layer, which St Paul outlines in our passage today. A body is made up of many parts, and this is where it becomes a very rich description of our community life, because each part is valuable, each is vital to the functioning of the body. We are one body, with many parts.

**And the way each part manifests its value is by each contributing something different to the body.** We do this by the gifts we offer – and Paul makes it clear that there are many gifts, and they all matter. Even if in human thinking some gifts are seen as greater than others, Paul is very clear in the section after this passage that God doesn't see it like that – whatever you offer to God, for his glory, whether it's on the stage or behind the scenes, is equally precious. *Everybody* matters. Everybody gets to play.

And that's because it's God who gives the gifts: (v11) 'All these are the work of one and the same Spirit (of God), and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.' If you have a gift it's because it's God who has given to you. It's not up to you to decide whether to use it you've got it for a reason. That's true for our natural gifts of course, but it's also true of our spiritual gifts. But what are 'spiritual' gifts. In the last 3 minutes, here's the whistle-stop guide:

Actually, it starts where we always start in the Christian faith: with **grace**. The New Testament word for grace is 'charis' – it also means 'gift'. God's unconditional, undeserved gift of love to us. The word for spiritual gifts in the New Testament is 'charismata'. It's almost the same word – it literally means grace-gifts or 'graces'. Which tell us three vitally important things:

**First, any discussion of spiritual gifts has to be rooted in the ultimate gift of all – God's lavish grace expressed to us in Jesus Christ.** Unless we are rooted in this ultimate grace, unless we are continually nourished by it, we'll never get a true handle on the spiritual gifts, like the ones mentioned in this passage – or to use their proper name, grace-gifts.

**Second, spiritual gifts or grace-gifts are reflections of God's deeper grace.** They all point to Jesus and show his grace to others. Think of them: the gift of encouragement, the gift of miracles and healings, the gift of wisdom or faith or generosity or serving – do they not all describe Jesus himself? He is our model of wisdom, generosity and service, he has the power to work miracles and healings, he is the great encourager of people.

That's the difference between natural and spiritual gifts – spiritual gifts all point directly to Jesus, and all grow the kingdom. Natural gifts are important, of course they are – we need musicians and organisers and caterers and welcomers – but we need spiritual gifts to make us more like Jesus and therefore to make these natural gifts effective for God's kingdom.

**Third, gifts are exactly that – gifts.** They are given to us by God. Yes, we nurture them and use them as best we can – but let's remember that they are *gifts*, they are signs of his grace. We don't earn them or deserve them. Which is why some gifts appear to be used most effectively by the most unlikely people. God is God and he usually surprises us. He sees things in us which we might not see in ourselves.

And, to come back to where we started: these gifts are meant to function in the context of a body – in other words a working organism where all the parts are interconnected. **God knows what he's doing.** He gives us all a role to play, with gifts we can use – which he can then use to bless others, help us grow and continue transforming the world. It really is that simple. God has given each of us gifts – all we have to do is trust God, and use them. What's your place in the body? Where is God calling you to serve? Will you seize that little bit of faith and go for it? The body needs you!