

Epiphany II

1 Corinthians 12.1-11
Gospel John 2 : 1 - 11

The Christian life is, or ought to be, an abundant life ever-rich in the blessings of God to God's people and the blessings of God's people to God's world. This pattern reaches back to the earliest chapters of Genesis as Abram is blessed to be the father of a nation which will in turn be a blessing unto the world. The pattern is then displayed throughout the rest of the Scriptures, as God's people are blessed to be a blessing. The emphasis changes from time to time, as God's people struggle to find their way: at times, blessing is poured out upon them, while at others, God's people serve as a blessing, or are encouraged to fulfill their mission in blessing the nations.

In this week's readings, we find that both sides of blessing are emphasised. Isaiah, gives us a beautiful picture of an Israel restored to her rightful place, God's delight dwelling within her, and her vindication spilling forth to the nations. Psalm 36, represents the unbridled gratitude of one living a life divinely blessed - an exuberant acclamation of God's steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and blessing which reach out and bring all people into its fold.

Paul speaks to his Corinthian church on matters of spiritual gifts, correcting a misguided hierarchy of giftedness by insisting that all are blessed by the one Spirit for the common good.

Our gospel passage serves as a beautiful lesson of God's blessings upon God's people. The empty pots, used for ritual purity, overflowed with wine for celebration. Representing us, as empty pots, waiting to be filled to overflowing by God's blessings for celebration.

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is an impassioned plea for unity. The church is unable to handle - much less celebrate - its rich diversity. In the section of the letter we heard this morning, Paul confronts one of the problems dividing the community: the problem of spiritual elitism. The problem of specialness.

Paul notices that the church assumes an implicit hierarchy when it comes to gifts. At first glance, this toxic first-century mess in Corinth might seem irrelevant to us. There is not much discussion, let alone fighting, over the gift of tongues in this church. Yet don't we have hierarchies of our own when it comes to the talents and abilities we admire most? Don't we secretly believe that some Christians the ones who preach, or pray eloquent prayers, or have the strongest leadership skills, or exhibit the most charisma have a more direct line to God than the people who wipe down pews, offer a cup of tea, or order office supplies?

Amongst us there are those whose gifts are recognised and praised, as there are those amongst us whose gifts are unnoticed and uncultivated.

In the case of the Corinthian church, Paul sees the dangers of religious snobbery, and responds with four arguments:

First, the source of all gifts is God.

The same spirit, the same Lord, the same God, Paul writes, grants and activates every gift. Lest we forget, a gift (by definition) is freely given. It is not earned. It is not deserved. It is not meant to inspire competition, envy, or pride.

The spiritual gifts we enjoy are treasures of a vast and generous grace, lavishly given by God at God's discretion.

Second, everyone is special.

This democratic notion might inspire a sigh, yet it is true. It is profoundly true.

Left to ourselves, Paul argues, we can't even make authentic confessions of faith.

The very fact that we can trust in Jesus, recognise him as Lord, or aspire to follow him at all, is a gift. Faith is a gift. The sign of our belovedness.

Third, the gifts are not for us.

Paul tells the church in Corinth that every gift and manifestation of the Holy Spirit exists for the common good. God apportions spiritual gifts based on the needs of the community as a whole - not on individual personal needs.

My gifts carry you, and your gifts carry me. It is God's intention that we rely on each other. That we need each other.

If we take this communal responsibility seriously, and share what we've been given, we might find deep relief and release in our lives of faith. We don't have

to *do* everything and *be* everything all by ourselves. I can lean on your wisdom.

You can press into my faith. We can be for each other.

And lastly, diversity is God's intention.

Diversity is at the heart of who God is, and so diversity is the right and natural trademark of God's church. Or at least, it should be.

Our goal is not uniformity; it is unity across difference. We embrace difference not ostracise people because they believe differently, love differently, dress differently, live their life ... differently.

The fact that our gifts are varied is not an accident; it is a reflection of God's own nature. The right and natural trademark of God's church.

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