

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 20 JANUARY 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
John 2:1-11, 1 Corinthians 12: 1-12



“Abundant gifts”

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I don't want to leave you uninformed....

And I don't. But at the same time I don't really feel equal to the task of explaining to you what spiritual gifts, or rather, a better translation, what the gifts of the Spirit are and what they mean for our life and that of our congregation.

I struggled with this sermon. Because there is a lot to say about the passages we read this morning. More than will fit in the 8 or 10 minutes I seem to be allowed for a sermon. And I am not sure I can make sense of all the conflicting and diverging angles in that amount of time. So why bother?

Well, I think because what Paul is on to is important. Important for our Church in our day and age, that is struggling with identity, profile, purpose, discernment and faith in no small way. As is what John is on about in the gospel story of the wedding in Cana.

Both passages are, amongst many other things, about identity, about profile, about purpose, about discernment, about faith, about priorities and principles of a life in Christ, inspired by the Spirit and activated, or, to say it with a more contemporary word, energised, by God.

First of all Paul establishes the foundations the life of a Christian community is based on. It looks like there was discussion about that in Corinth, even then. What distinguishes the Christian Community from any other community around it?

Paul starts with the negative: Nobody speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed”. For those in Paul's congregation that would have meant committing to accepting Jesus' death on the cross, generally considered a curse by people of both pagan and Jewish descent, as a blessing. Nobody, at that time, would have been able to make that massive paradigm shift, unless by the power of the Holy Spirit. And, nobody would have been able to make the next step, to say “Jesus is Lord”, other than through the Holy Spirit either because it involved disregarding the emperor cult for those of pagan descent, and deviating from a strict monotheism for people of Jewish descent.

These were no small matters and could potentially cost you your family relationships, business networks or even your life.

I've wondered how these two foundational statements would translate to our time and situation? We are too used to think about the cross as no big deal. The fact that Jesus was executed as a common criminal and hung from a tree (Deuteronomy 22:23) does no longer throw up the enormous barriers for believing in his message as it did two thousand years ago. (Although to some outsiders it may still sound pretty absurd!).

I think we all agree, even those outside the Church, that Jesus was a good man. That his message was, essentially, good, even if his followers have made a mess of living it out at

times. So perhaps the cursing is not such an issue? But what about the culture of the pursuit of personal success, health and wealth we are all subject to? Isn't that, in effect, cursing what Jesus stood for?

What are the things that would prevent us from saying "Jesus is Lord?". The above mentioned egocentricity of our culture? Or perhaps modern philosophy and psychology that tell us never to give anybody or anything absolute authority over our lives and only worship our own happiness? All of us I think will probably feel the strain of that culture in one way or another. And it takes courage, and going against the flow, to dare stand up and say "Jesus is Lord" of my life and nothing else much matters.

Now, says Paul, in a very cleverly constructed, Trinitarian way, now we have established the foundations we all stand on, you need to know that from these foundations flow a variety of gifts, different services and diversities of activities. Gifts, charismata, or perhaps translate endowments given by the Spirit, services, or maybe translate attendances or ministrations, given by the one Lord, and activities, or let's translate that with operations, effects or things wrought, originating in the one God.

In other words: Once we commit to Jesus as Lord, we discover we are gifted with a variety of gifts from a variety of sources that are all connected to that one, principal statement: Jesus is Lord. Gifts come from the Spirit, ministrations through the Lord, and effects of things wrought from God. And as all these sources, Spirit, Lord, and God, are one, so are all the gifts. Not one is better than the other, or more important. Like God is unity in diversity, so is all the community that confesses Jesus as Lord, diversity in unity.

The Corinthians struggled with that. Where some felt that knowledge, study was more important, others felt that practical ministry and outreach should be a prime concern of the congregation, while others argued that to lead a life of piety and prayer may be more important than anything else. To translate it into contemporary terminology: Some felt that an informed faith, nurtured by study and reflection was most important, while others argued that Good Grub and Sunshine Mission were where most of the energy should be spent, while others yet again argued that pastoral care for the frailer members of the congregation, worship, prayer and meditation should be core.

You're all onto something says Paul. All this comes from the same source, and as long as it has "Jesus is Lord" writ large over it, they are all equal, each working in their own way, inspired by the one Spirit, the one Lord, and the one God. Where Jesus is Lord all these manifestations are given, for the common good. Which, almost certainly for Paul, would have meant the common good of the Christian Community and not of the whole wide world, as we have more and more come to think of it.

Paul was, first and foremost, in this letter, concerned with the well being of his own people, and only after that with the wider world around them.

That's important to keep in mind when we look at the gifts he then proceeds to talk about. Because they all have to do with the life of the community of believers, and not with what one would generally, morally preferably, do in life. They are not guidelines in general for a life well lived. And it might perhaps be beneficial for us while reflecting on this passage to so reflect on our own community too, before turning our attention outward too easily and too soon and turn our back on what lies at the core of our own life as a community.

Wisdom, knowledge, faith. They are familiar enough categories that may not be too hard to envisage at work in our own context. We've got some very wise persons in this congregation. People whose words we all know to heed when they speak, because their thoughts have been helpful and constructive over a long period of time.

Knowledge is another category that is respected and revered in our NBUC community. Factual, rational as well as spiritual knowledge and insight. We have a popular education program, lectures, study groups and an impressive number of people who are forever stretching their minds in many directions, and sharing the knowledge and insights they've gained generously. Thumbs up!

And faith? We advertise ourselves as a worshipping, learning and serving community. A community where faith finds expression in worship, seeks to be informed, intelligent, and practical, and at the same time there are, mostly in individual conversations I have encountered deeply spiritual and faithful relationships with the divine in many different shapes and forms.

In Corinth these three would not have been so straightforward by the way. They struggled trying to discern who had wisdom, which kind of knowledge was to be pursued, and what expressions of faith were valid. In that sense their faith community was much more diverse and challenging than ours is, a bit like all varieties of Christianity existing within one congregation instead of being separated out over local congregations and different denominations as in our time.

The next gifts Paul names, however, are probably more challenging for us than they were for the Corinthians at that time. Where they lived in a world where the paranormal was taken for granted, we live in a world where rationality and the post-enlightenment empiricism have put question marks around just about every aspect of the working of faith beyond the rational and factual.

Where the working of miracles and healing would probably have been accepted as a self evident part of any successful faith or spirituality in Paul's day, for us this is no longer the case. Many of us would probably be inclined to believe most miracles will have some kind of scientific explanation that disqualifies them as miracles, or use the word more metaphorically as in "heart surgery is a miracle of technology and medical achievement". Real miracles? I wonder how many of you believe in them, or would see the working of miracles as one of the core gifts and ministrations of our faith.

And what about healing? I know I have met with scepticism, and unbelief after the healing I received of my chronic pain, but calling the treatment hypnotherapy, even though the hypnotherapist and the rheumatologist both agree prayer probably had a lot to do with it, is easier than talking about it as an example of miracle and faith healing both in and outside the Church, and perhaps even more inside than outside the Church.

These things freak us out. They don't fit our rational categories, and they don't comply with the scientific outlook we believe our universe is submitted to. But what if we don't have the whole truth? What if there is more than what the eye can see and the ear can hear and the brain understand? What if prayer works, and not only because it helps us focus, it helps us relax, it helps us share, and it helps us express what is important to us?

Similarly, prophecy and tongues are categories we struggle with. Prophecy? OK. If it is about speaking the truth and reading the signs of what Godless living can bring about,

we're prepared to accept it as part of our social justice program and voice what we believe should be important to us. But if it comes to visions, voices and whisperings that come from nowhere with startling clarity and urgency, we find it difficult to fit them into our world view. I've been unfortunate enough to have been visited by a couple of those over the course of my ministry and my experience is that they will always cause trouble. Nobody wants to listen to or acknowledge them, while those who receive them feel an urgency about them that won't be ignored. They are a nuisance!

And last, but definitely not least, speaking in tongues. Since I received the gift at a conference twenty years ago I've felt awkward, superstitious, gullible and plain ridiculous. Most of the time I even manage to forget about it, until there is something really important to pray about, and I start babbling...

I don't know what it is, I can't explain it, I'm embarrassed to admit to it, but praying in tongues, for me, has been a mixed blessing. And yet, with my rational mind, I know there is something to it I may not entirely understand. I know that it works and that makes it a gift not to be discarded but accepted as coming from the Spirit, given for the common good. I can use it when all words fail, both in a negative and a positive sense.

I think we neglect the last gifts Paul mentions and we have difficulty with in our day and age, at our peril. They are part of the rich tapestry of gifts that are made available to us by the power of the Spirit, in attendance to the ministry of Jesus and as a working out of God's activity in our lives.

They are given to nurture and promote the common good of our community, to fill us with joy and strength and thanksgiving. To bring us to full participation in the body of Christ.

That same Christ who started, according to the gospel of John, his ministry by saving a wedding feast on the third day by making wine available in abundance and so offering those around him, and us, a glimpse of the world he had come to bring about.

A world overflowing with the best possible enriching, nurturing, joyously uplifting spirited stuff imaginable, where on the third day disaster is changed into a miracle of hope and healing no one could ever have believed possible, prophesying to the world that there is something more at work in the world than the empirically possible or probable, a force stronger than injustice, violence and death, a passion deeper than continuing to live life as we know it without rocking the boat too much.

That there is deeper wisdom, further knowledge, greater faith, that miracles happen and healing can be achieved, that prophets will rise up and things beyond words are longing to be discovered and implemented towards the common good of all, in the faith, through Jesus our Lord. Amen