

SUNDAY 19 JANUARY 2025

Second Sunday of Epiphany

(Isaiah 62.1-5)

I Corinthians 12.1-11

John 2.1-11

I wonder if you have ever directed a play or an orchestra or a choir ? James and Sarah will recognise what I am going to say, of course, and possibly others here as well. In the past I have directed many plays (of an amateur variety and in various contexts – including the production of the mediaeval moral play *Everyman* in St Mary's Church in Battersea).

Auditioning is a fascinating process, and very important in an amateur context. People put their names down for this or that part, and then read excerpts from them. Panto Cinderella: one of the ugly sisters or the fairy godmother. If you are doing the casting, you may reach the conclusion that the part someone has auditioned for is in fact just right for them and they will play it best. However you may also decide that they would make a really good impression in quite a different part. Panto: Lord High Chamberlain. This often causes consternation: "I couldn't possibly do that, it's nowhere near my age, my personality is quite different", but with some persuasion they will agree to give it a try. Great is their delight when after some rehearsal time they can see that they have been cast in a way which will allow their God-given gifts to flourish in quite a different direction, and they will go on to develop them further. This is particularly rewarding in the case of people who have never before taken part in any sort of public performance, and are overwhelmed when people say to them how moved or entertained they were by their rendering of the part they have been playing.

In his first letter to the people of Corinth, who have been getting a bit out of hand and puffing themselves up, St Paul is wanting in Chapter 12 to make sure they all understand that it is only the Holy Spirit which enables God-given gifts to be seen and developed, because they are the gifts which build up the body of Christ for the common good, rather than building up one individual's sense of self-importance.

In Paul's litany of gifts, which are all quite specific in their description, there is one which stands out from the others: the gift of faith – Christian faith, because it is not so much a skill as a state of mind and heart and one which, through the working of the Holy Spirit, enables all the other gifts to develop and flourish. Faith is the greatest gift of all and is never to be taken for granted, because it has come from God and needs constant attention and nurturing; faith is the greatest journey we will ever make, because in the end it leads us back to God.

But there is another gift – it's not mentioned in Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, but it lies at the core of Chapter 13, which I'm sure you know well and is also very popular at weddings. It starts with this: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal", and it continues "and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing". When Jesus himself was asked what was the most important commandment, he replied that there were two: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. It is the commandment to love God for his creation, for the gift of his son Jesus Christ and of his Holy Spirit, and the desire to follow it, which has prompted Mary, the mother of Jesus, to say what she says in today's Gospel: "They have no wine". She knows who her son is. It's rather like a private conversation between mother and son, who then replies: "My hour has not yet come", indicating that if he now performs a miracle, it will be the first one of many which will lead him eventually to the cross. Mary however cannot know this yet, but has complete confidence in Jesus

by telling the servants to do whatever he instructs them to do (it would be fascinating to hear what sort of conversations Mary and Jesus might have had before this moment). The excellent new wine which Jesus causes to be produced from water can be seen as a symbol of all the wonderful gifts God has in store for us, even though we like the water jars are old – not old in the sense of how old we are, but old in the sense that as Christians we are always to be alert to what new things the Spirit may be saying to us, to enable us to go on loving God and our neighbour, and in so doing to flourish.

In another place Jesus reminds his disciples (with an irony that is not lost on us) that he will not always be physically with them on earth, but that our neighbours will continue to be ever present. All our neighbours are with us; they are all made in the same image as we are, the image of God, which is why we are called to use our best gifts on their behalf. The miracle of our individual human nature is that the Holy Spirit works lovingly within each one of us to develop the gifts which we then bring to God's world.

So as we live out our lives in this church and community here let's use the gifts God is showering on us. We all have something to offer, whether it's to be our Treasurer or serving coffee, whether it is in building up the common life of St Mary's in deepening faith and fellowship, or in service out in the community. But it is not the same as any old club, and has little to do with having this beautiful building to worship in.

So as we ponder the gifts which God's Holy Spirit is bestowing on us, let us give thanks for his ultimate gift of faith, which enables us to do the things He would have us do, this gift which is rooted fundamentally in the love which has its origin in God himself. The last word is from Jesus in Chapter 10 of John's Gospel: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly".

Amen

PBW – 17 January 2025