

‘Many gifts, one Spirit’

17th May 2015, Jesus College, Oxford

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

1 Corinthians 12: 1-11

‘There are many varieties of gift, but the same Spirit... all these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually, just as the Spirit chooses’.

Do we behave as though we believe that? In the university where I work, and I’m sure in this one, it can sometimes feel as though there’s a hierarchy of gifts- that there are some we value more than others in this environment. To get here at all, you’ve presumably had to develop and emphasise your academic gifts, with musical and sporting and dramatic gifts all adding value. All of these, in one form or another, stress *achievement*, attainment, things we can *do* and can *show* that we can do to a high standard. And in exam season, of course, the emphasis on this kind of achievement is even stronger. The students I work with at York can feel very pressured to prove their worth in terms of results and jobs and earning potential. There’s nothing wrong with any of that *as such*, they’re perfectly valid things to want and to work for. I came through a system very like this one, albeit at a university a little further east, and I wouldn’t be here tonight if I hadn’t; so those questions have preoccupied me too from time to time. But as a Christian working in education, I also have to ask myself a different question: what of these *other* gifts, the gifts St Paul writes about to the church at Corinth? Where do they fit into our understanding of what education is actually for? How can a *Christian* understanding of giftedness help us make sense of this very special, but often very pressured, environment- and to go on making sense of it creatively when we leave?

In our first reading tonight, God calls the young Jeremiah to the difficult vocation of a prophet to his people. And Jeremiah’s first, instinctive reaction is to say: I can’t. I’m too young, too inexperienced. What have I got to say that anyone wants to listen to? But God’s response, I think, comes in two parts. First, he assures Jeremiah that he is not being judged on what he can already *do*, but on what he *is*. ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I consecrated you’. A baby in the womb can do absolutely nothing for itself. It has no independent existence yet, and is reliant on its mother for everything. And yet, God says that even before we are born, before we begin to learn independence and discover our individuality, God loves us and values us *as we are*.

And the second part of God’s call to Jeremiah is about equipping this person who has yet to fulfil his potential: ‘You shall speak *whatever I command you... I appoint you* to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant’. God’s confidence in Jeremiah calls out of him gifts he never knew he had, gifts he had never had any *reason* to know were there because he’d never needed to draw on them. At this moment of calling, everything about him is still untested. But God is saying to him: my love for you is not conditional on what you go on to do, because my love for you existed before you had done anything at all- but when you do go on to fulfil this specific task which I am giving to you, I will still be with you. You will never have to act alone, but always within the framework of my love: so whatever you do go on to do, you have no need to fear. And so Jeremiah does go

on. He finds his voice as a prophet through the most difficult and painful moment in his people's history- the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the majority of its people. Jeremiah's job is to speak to those left behind in the ruins of the city, with the same assurance God once gave him personally: you have not been abandoned, you are not alone, there is hope. And this is the same message God has for each of us now, as we too seek to understand who we are and what we are to do with it.

Paul too, in our second reading, is speaking to a troubled community; the newborn Church in Corinth, which is clearly experiencing some division and disagreement (If you're ever tempted to despair at the mess today's churches make of trying to live together with disagreement, read Corinthians and feel better, because what we're going through is nothing new). And in this particular passage, Paul is saying something we need to hear today too, not just as an academic community but also as the Church: 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*'. In other words, the gifts I have are not just for me, to give me a sense of achievement or self-worth built solely on what I can do. And neither are yours. All of us who aspire to understand the Christian life are required to use our gifts to benefit not just ourselves, but all the communities to which we belong. I fear the Church of England, in particular, needs to understand this more deeply at present, as it makes decisions about how to identify and nurture the next generation of potential senior leaders. Those responsible for developing their training programme have, unfortunately in my view, chosen to use the language of 'talent' as a shorthand for what they're looking for. If they had chosen the language of gift and giftedness instead, that would have been a useful reminder that the source of *all* our gifts is not ourselves but the Spirit: and thus that we should not keep them for ourselves, or deploy them to make ourselves feel good, but that gifts are for sharing with the whole Body of Christ.

Paul goes on to list several gifts which are important in different ways to the Christian community. There is no hierarchy in the gifts he names: each one contributes to the life of the whole out of whatever the Spirit has given them. As with Jeremiah, the emphasis is on resourcing and equipping. Jeremiah was given what he needed to speak to his people, at a time when they really needed to hear a prophetic voice which was both comforting and challenging. Paul was trying to get the Christians in Corinth to see that they already had among them all the gifts that could make their community whole and help it to flourish. Immediately after this passage, his letter to the Corinthians goes on to make it very clear that the gifts of the Spirit are not to be understood competitively; Paul uses the analogy of parts of the body which need each other in order to function fully and effectively, and he applies the same idea to the varieties of gift he names.

A complete human being does not need all the gifts Paul lists here. A complete and healthy Church probably does, though different communities *have* placed different values on particular gifts at particular times. The risk for us, as individuals and as part of the Church, is a risk of getting sucked in to an understanding of giftedness which treasures one sort of gift over another, or which dismisses those who do not possess particular gifts as though they were somehow incomplete, either as Christians or as human beings. I don't think my parents, who met as students at this university in the 1960s, really understood why I went from my

degree in languages at Another Place to work with adults with learning disabilities. Come to that, I'm not sure I understood it either. I thought at the time it was because I needed a break from the academic treadmill, to do something completely different for a while before coming back to study. Now I'd see it slightly differently: that somewhere inside me, I recognised that I was not a complete human being with all the necessary gifts, but a rather lopsided one, whose pursuit of academic excellence had perhaps pushed aside the chance to develop in other ways. My nice shiny Oxbridge degree didn't mean anything at all to the disabled people I was working with. That wasn't the way they related to me, and it was nothing to do with how they learnt to value me as a person. Yet I learned so much from living and working alongside these people, so terribly limited and incomplete in one way, but in another paradoxically much *more* whole and gifted than I was- because they knew and accepted who they were. Living with them, I learned what it meant for Jeremiah to hear God's assurance: 'before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I called you'. Called not to do- or not *merely* to do- but to *be*: to be a full human being, made in the image of God, able to let go of our individual gifts to the extent that we use them for the common good. And more than that, that our gifts do not define us or express our worth as human beings, because they are not *ours*, but given to us as the Spirit chooses.

So be honest about the gifts you have- and about those you have yet to develop. Rejoice in what you can do- but don't use your justifiable pleasure in your own achievements in order to judge or reject those who don't share your particular abilities. There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And we need them all, if we are to function as whole and healthy people, a whole and healthy Church, and a whole and healthy society.