

Simple gifts: 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11

Just think: what was the best Christmas present you received this year? Who gave it... why was it so good? Perhaps the thoughtfulness of the giver (it really was just what you wanted)... the surprise (something you never even thought you needed)... the extravagance... In today's New Testament reading we get a different take on giving and receiving gifts. Our shared understanding in the global north at least, where the big fat man with the long white beard dominates, is one where presents are given, because of our virtue (he sees whether you are naughty or nice after all), tailored to our longings and simply for our delight, our personal fulfilment. By contrast, Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts imagines a divine giver who bestows gifts based not what on individuals want but on what will most contribute to the common good of a whole community.

From the beginning of his letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul reminds them that they exist, not just as a group of people who gather once a week, but as a "church of God," and not just any church of God, but "the church of God that is in Corinth." God has called them together to live and serve in a specific city, with its own particular historical and cultural context.

The section Mary read earlier focuses on the identity of this community and the spiritual gifts that help it to grow and thrive.

So first let's think about the community's identity... – Notice how as he talks about the community, Paul uses *family* language rather than political or organisational ideas – one scholar I read translates *brothers and sisters* as *My dear Christian family*. Now we'll all know that family likeness often makes itself known unpredictably (it might come out in looks...or in habits, like our sense of humour... or even... our walk ...) But does make itself known nonetheless... alongside their individual identity, each person in the family shares in some way the family likeness.

I wonder: what is our family likeness as members of Hinkledux churches? We are 3 churches and in some ways one... so for us this may work at several levels... Geographical: So some of us might think well I belong to Hinxton church... or I belong to Duxford... Others might think about different activities or groups: I am part of the Thursday Fellowship group... I go to Compline... I like 8am BCP services... I prefer all age worship... I am a bellringer...

These may be our ideas of belonging... but our character goes beyond that. What family likeness do we aspire to? On the eve of the US presidential inauguration, I read a piece by an American commentator, who argued that the church – in the USA - is really the last place where people of differing beliefs and backgrounds are brought together, where conservative and liberal can sit next to each other in the pew. I don't think that is how we are... But wouldn't it be great if one of the distinctive characteristics of church- something that people really noticed about us - is that it is a gathering where people of different backgrounds, ages, politics come together and *all get on...* and *love each other...*the classic Anglican Broad Church in the very best sense!

So, that's what community looks like... then ...

What community does

Paul gives some examples of spiritual gifts – abilities, practices, experiences... like wisdom, prophecy and healing. He's writing to a bunch of people who are focused on the more dramatic gifts like these, viewing them as status markers. As in ...you're a much more spiritual person if you exhibit these gifts/have these experiences. The one that they are – it seems – especially focused on – speaking in tongues – ecstatic utterances in unknown languages – is the one he lists last. I think he's making a point! I think this is more likely an indicative rather than an exhaustive list. Elsewhere (in Romans 12: 6-8), Paul mentions prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, being compassionate, or (in Ephesians 4: 11) the gifts are associated with roles: apostles, prophets, evangelists pastors, teachers.

And while some of these gifts are about spontaneous amazing revelations, not all of them are. Many are rooted in practice and planning and learned behaviour (in a good way)... like generosity... often more effective when thought about beforehand... or the ability to understand and articulate what scripture and theology says... a mix of the hard work of study and the gift of being able to connect emotionally, spiritually with what God is saying to the church... My husband Jon loves the gift of what is sometimes called administration rather than leading... being a good organiser!

But it's very important to notice what these gifts are for...they are, Paul says, *given for the common good (v7)*... As we think about the life of our

churches, we might consider what makes for good gatherings... someone to offer a welcome... someone to tame the sound system... people to read the bible and lead prayers... provide hospitality in the form of coffee and cake... someone who looks after the heating... After a wonderful Christmas season of welcoming our wider community into church... thank you!

And beyond Sundays and high days and holidays...let's remember all the invitational and service stuff – the good things, hospitality we share with those around us... Tiddlers... Coffee mornings...as well as the individual acts of service to our neighbours that often are not named so often

In all these activities, each of us has something to offer to the community... At the start of a new year... can I invite you to ask yourself: what do I have that would benefit the community? Where can I use my skills and abilities best for the good of the community?

How the community functions

Last, and of course not least, Paul stresses that we must remember the initiative is with the giver. Unlike the various fairies who give the infant princess gifts in Sleeping Beauty, all these different gifts are given *by the same spirit* – We are all dependent on God's grace in the giving of gifts... it is the **giver** not the gift is that makes the difference...that accomplishes anything... *in all of them and in everyone it is the same God* at work. (v6) God who is in god's very self – three persons in one – a community of love.

As we reflected, we listened to this recording of the song *Simple gifts*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOx9quc-iow>