

Epiphany 2 C. St Stephen's 9.30 & 11. 1 Cor 12: 1-11
16.1.22

"There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." (vv4-6)

I don't know whether to be amused, annoyed or exasperated by the people who say to me that they don't go to church as they are not really Christian, but they do try to live by the Sermon on the Mount.

I suspect you'd agree with me that it's hard enough for a Christian to live by the tenets of the Sermon; for an uncommitted person, I'd say it was virtually impossible.

Take Jesus' command to love our enemies. Most would agree that to do so is unnatural. There can be very few who haven't at some time attempted to get their own back on someone who has wronged them, faith or no faith, even if it was simply spreading malicious gossip about them. But as Christians we are to love our enemies. This doesn't mean that we have to like them; it does mean being prepared to do the best we can for them; to seek their highest good and not doing them down, especially when it is in our power to do so. This is only possible if we live our lives close to God, and open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Spirit which will have a profound effect on our lives and on our actions, and this will be evident to others. A teacher took a job in Japan, on the strict understanding that he didn't attempt to proselytise, nor mention anything about the Christian faith – and this he agreed to abide by. He was scrupulous in holding to his agreement; but he gave himself to helping and encouraging his students in their studies; he was always ready to see them, and took the greatest care over the slower members of his class. When the time came for him to leave, so impressed were his students of his care and interest, that over half converted to Christianity. We should never underestimate the importance of example. The gospel is commended far more by example than by words.

We live in interesting times regarding matters of faith. Secularism is the standard position of the so called 'chattering classes', who like to think of themselves as the intelligentsia. These people have an antagonism towards the Church in particular and often to religion in general. In spite of Press reports, the Church is fighting back and finding new ways of presenting the faith and in being Church. If you are one of those who is pessimistic, think of the Church in the 14th Century – the 1300's. Things were far worse then than now. Many church buildings were closed and abuses were common. Yet throughout that time, there were men and women who kept the faith, meeting regularly for prayer, study and to encourage one another.

One priest wrote at the time: "What a man actually did, didn't matter, as long as it was offered to God. "One can spin, another can make shoes and all these are gifts of the Holy Spirit. I tell you, if I were not a priest, I should esteem it a great gift that I was able to make shoes and would try to make them so well as to be a pattern for all."

One of our faults is that so often we limit the work of the Spirit, praising some gifts and not others. The Spirit is able to transform our natural abilities if they are offered to God, so they become an asset both to the Church and to the wider community.

It's sad when people say that they have no abilities. The opposite is true. Everyone has something they are, or could be, good at. This may not be the obvious since a good many of us have no musical or artistic ability. On the other hand, they may be good listeners, or are good at administration, or have a natural wisdom or insight, be helpful by nature, patient, humorous, or any other ability.

There are also to special gifts given by the Spirit when the need arises. How often has it been remarked on the appointment of a person to a particular post that they can't see why he got she got the job, only to find that they grow into the responsibility, making a success of it.

Irrespective of any special gifts, or our innate abilities, there comes to all who live 'in the Spirit', the gifts which the Spirit bestows – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self- control. As we grow in faith, so the HS manifests these gifts in our lives.

If we are to live 'in the Spirit', we have to turn away from self and learn to look towards God. A besetting sin of present-day society is making self the centre of so much of life. We see this in the goal of 'self-fulfilment', the desire for fame or to influence others; the endless pursuit of wealth. The Times back in November had an article of the way the wealthy were spending money on bigger and better things they didn't need, often out of boredom, as a result of the restrictions that Covid was placing on us all. If only they would look beyond themselves and see the needs of people around them but, like Dives, doing nothing to help Lazarus, because he simply wasn't aware of him. No wonder the world is in mess it is. I suggest that the revelations about the goings-on in 10 Downing Street is another example of the self-centredness of so much of society – unaware of the wider context, but only looking at their own satisfaction.

The story is told of a sculptor who had among the many pieces of work in his studio, the model of a cathedral, beautifully made in every detail. It was covered in dust, and ignored. One day his assistant looked at it and wondered what it would be like with a light inside. The model was transformed and all who came into the studio were drawn to the model. The light from within drew people to it. Put another way, the light of the Spirit within us can make Christ dearer, heaven nearer and the word of God clearer.