

Pentecost 2024

Acts 2.1-21

Romans 8.22-27

John 15.26-27, 16.4-15

Have you ever directed a play or an orchestra or a choir ? Sarah and James will recognise what I am going to say, of course, and possibly others in our community as well. In the past I have directed many plays (of an amateur variety, I hasten to add).

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. 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 this or that person would make a really good impression in quite a different part. This usually 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.

You might say that the theme of this sermon could be "We are all gifted". In his various letters to different communities Paul is wanting 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 or another 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 lies at the core of 1 Corinthians 13, which I'm sure you know well and is also very popular at both weddings and funerals. 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 him, which for example prompts Mary Magdalene in John 12 to anoint Jesus with costly perfume. Judas Iscariot is firmly put in his place when he objects to what Mary has done. Jesus reminds him (with an irony that is not lost on us) that he will not always be physically with them on earth, but that our neighbours – the poor – 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 bring to God's world, including the gift of faith itself.

I'm sure you have all read the Archbishops' Prayer Journal for the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost, as part of the Thy Kingdom Come project. In the introduction we are invited to choose five people who do not yet know the love of God for themselves, and to pray for them each day. I have to admit I hesitated at that point, mainly because I could think of only one or two people I know who definitely do come into that category. Of course many people believe in the Gospel, to a greater or lesser extent, and gatherings such as Time to Reflect or Lent Groups offer an unthreatening avenue to express it. There are many ways in which we gradually come to faith and come to recognise the love of God for ourselves, as I myself can testify.

So as we live out our lives in this church and community here in Woodbridge and Great Bealings let's use the gifts God is showering on us. We all have something to offer, whether big or small, whether it is in building up the common life of St Mary's in deepening faith, or in service out in the community, or a combination of both.

Today is Pentecost, a day on which we give thanks for the gifts that God in Jesus Christ is giving to us all through the agency of the Holy Spirit, whom some refer to as "God on the move". How true this is, as the disciples themselves discovered, because the Holy Spirit is most definitely not under any sort of restriction, but roaming around looking for men, women and children to infuse with his love.

We can see this in many acts of kindness in our own community, but also through daily news bulletins from around the world against terrible odds, and this is helping to shape us all into the human beings we are to be in the future. As Jesus says in today's Gospel reading from John this Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. So it is a gift worth having and it remains a gift which is rooted fundamentally in the love which has its origin in God himself.

