

## Gifts & Ministries

### Romans 12.1-8, Ephesians 4.1-13; Lu 13.31-35

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. This is the season when Christians look forward to the events of Easter. It is a time of preparation when we reflect on the temptation of Jesus and the cost of following the way of Christ. Our gospel reading today took us to that passage when Jesus grieves over Jerusalem. Jesus seems to be aware of his own death looming ahead of him in that city.

He reflects out loud that Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets and the messengers that God has sent. Instead of responding in anger we see in him the compassion of the mother-heart of God.

The Lord wants to gather the lost and helpless as a hen gathers her chicks.

It is a reminder to us that this business of being messengers of God, being the body of Christ on earth, can be a very costly thing. Yet everyone who claims to be a follower of Christ is called to be involved in his service. Each is gifted for some kind of Christian ministry. In our daily experience of serving God the challenge is to:

- and seek to **find our gifts and ministries**
- and then **begin to use them to help one another**

In our Ephesians reading (chapter 4.11&12) the writer speaks of the ascended Christ giving gifts – “the gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers” and their role is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” So who does the work of ministry? This is an important point... it is not the pastors, teachers, evangelists, prophets and apostles – their job is to “equip the saints” to do the work of ministry. Saints (holy ones) is the New Testament word that is used of all the followers of Jesus (we are made holy by our faith in Christ.) Who does the work of ministry? – All of us! But we need equipping and training so that we can become competent. Another translation reads “to equip God’s people for works of service” and the reason for this is in the last part of the sentence “so that the body of Christ may be built up.”

Let’s put all that together so we don’t miss the point. The reason that the Lord gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers was:

- to equip *all of us* as God’s people,
- so that *we* could do the work of ministry
- so that the church may be built up in this place.

Are we looking for the church to be built up in this place?

If so this is the biblical pattern... we find our area of ministry, we get equipped & trained, we start serving... and the church is built up.

I spoke last week of the advent of professional clergy in the church with the result that, many of these tasks that were distributed to all of us, have been taken over by the professional minister.

So myth has developed of the omni-competent minister.

Mary White had resigned as minister of Seaview Uniting Church, so a Pastoral Call Committee was formed. While Mary had developed many close friends in the church, and her ministry was warmly spoken of – the Call Committee in their discussions were also aware of areas of ministry where she had been inadequate, or not functioned at all. A repeat would be unacceptable so they worked very carefully on the job description for their new minister. This is what they came up with:

Experienced minister needed for established and prestigious church. The applicant will preach for 10 minutes each Sunday and serve as manager, administrator, and correspondent. He or she will have experience as a teacher, evangelist, speech-maker, writer and editor. It is expected that the applicant will competently perform the functions of social worker, counsellor, spiritual advisor, visitor of the sick, and comforter of the bereaved; as well as being theologian in residence, interpreter of the church and culture at large, and official delegate to all conferences. A knowledge of computers is expected, with particular emphasis on word processing, desktop publishing, and databases. A working knowledge of public address and projection systems is desirable. The applicant will also be called upon occasionally as a garden supervisor and artist.

Hours of work include being on call 24 hours a day and attendance at all meetings is required. The ideal candidate will have a burning desire to work with youth but spend most of the week with senior citizens. We seek someone with a prophetic voice who will speak out against the evil in the community – without hurting anyone’s feelings. Some daily home visiting is expected but the applicant should always be available in the office should emergency arise. Preference will be given to a young pastor with at least 20 years experience. Some light janitorial duties will be required.

You can see why I speak of the *myth* of the omni-competent pastor. And while I got that job description by Googling and collating a couple of the funny ones, sadly in my search I found several serious ones that were not too dissimilar.

The biblical pattern is for each and every Christian to function in some ministry gift. In so doing there is a sense of fulfilment, and result is that the church is built up. So Paul writes to the believers at Corinth, “to each is given a manifestation of the Spirit (NLT spiritual gift) for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12.7) Who gets the spiritual gifts to do ministry? – “each” - everyone in the church. We all have at least one. What do that look like? – They are many and varied. God is not much into uniformity. He loves variety. He doesn’t clone – every snowflake is different, every fingerprint has a different pattern. Think about it. So 1 Corinthians 12.4&5 says, “There are *different* kinds of spiritual gift... *different* ways to serve the... Lord and we can all do *different* things”

Of course, our talents are gifts from God too – but let me explain the extra dimension of ‘spiritual gifts’. It’s the divine dimension. According to Peter’s first letter (1 Peter 4.10&11) there are 2 types of spiritual gifts:

- Speaking gifts – in which we are dependent on getting words from God to speak
- Serving gifts – in which we are dependent on the strength that God supplies.

How does that work? Being ‘dependant on words from God’ or ‘dependant on God’s strength’ - What does that mean? This is the ‘spiritual’ part of gifts. Dependence on God means that we are looking beyond ourselves to resources from God. For instance when someone is going through a difficult time, we ask God ‘What can I do to help?’ Or ‘What can I say to help?’

It may be that that what comes to mind is:

that we should just be there with them as a support  
or it could be that an encouraging word comes to mind,  
or even some advice

or, it may be we think, ‘I could pop around to this person who is struggling and do some housework or mow the lawns.’

‘Mowing the lawns doesn’t sound very spiritual’ you might think – but there amongst those charismatic gifts in Corinthians is the gift of helping others.

You may already know your gifting and the area of ministry to which God has called you. We're going to have a couple of workshops when we can explore this together and get a sense of God's call

Can I encourage you to attend one of these. The first will be a bring-and-share luncheon at Trinity 12.30pm this Friday 26th February and it will be repeated at All Hallows 7.30pm Tuesday 2nd March.

We don't begin in any ministry either confident or competent. That's why we need those people that the Scriptures say are sent to 'equip' us. After our meeting on Tuesday evening I was talking to Alison and she said a helpful picture was of a young child learning new skills learning to walk, learning to talk.

Twenty-six years ago I took my first funeral. It was here on the North Shore. I felt scared, inadequate, unsure of myself, unprofessional. After the service the family said, "Will you come with us to the graveside down Schnapper Rock Rd for the committal?" It was raining, we stood under umbrellas by an open grave. Everyone looked to me... and I read from my ministers' manual, "Into God's keeping we commend our loved one now departed. Into the earth which is the Lord's we commit his body; earth to earth; ashes to ashes; dust to dust; in the full assurance that as he has borne the image of the earthly, so also by faith shall he bear the image of the heavenly."

And it was the right thing to say. What else could one say at such a time? This was a time for just these simple words of faith... And the family felt reassured. And having gone with a sense of foreboding, I returned home with an overwhelming sense of privilege that God had allowed me to be involved in this moment. Though stumbling at first, we gradually develop competence in the areas to which God calls us.

I know that when we talk about moving to Local Shared Ministry we think first about people from the congregation being involved in preaching, teaching, worship leading, pastoral care and officiating the sacraments. But, remember last week when we looked at the Body of Christ, Paul wrote about the unseen parts being just as important, "we can't get along without the parts of the body that seem to be the weakest" (1 Corinthians 12.22). So it is that there are people here that are gifted in administration, helping, hospitality, encouragement, discernment, giving, intercession and doing acts of mercy. These people are equally important and equally called as those with a public role.

It is my understanding from both Scripture and Local Shared Ministry that all the gifts needed for the ministry of the church already exist within the local church. If there was a group didn't already possess these gifts they would be defined as a mission field rather than a church.

I was in a church meeting once when the Property person reported that he was to hire the services of a professional cleaner so that members of the congregation would no longer need to vacuum the church. A retired widow spoke up and said with an emotional voice, "I count it a privilege to vacuum the church. It is a special time for me that I spend alone in the church building doing this task. Please don't take it away from me." This was a woman who had spent her working life in Christian ministry and in her retirement was continuing theological study. It wasn't her only ministry but she felt called to the ministry of vacuuming the church.

The scriptural evidence is that every follower of Jesus is gifted for ministry. One of our most important tasks over the first part of this year is to name and discern these ministry gifts and identify which ones each of us has received. We need people to stand up front here and lead – and equally we need people who will serve out of the limelight. The way God has created our personality, our desires, our abilities, our particular gifts is all part of a divine design so we can fulfil our God-given purpose.

As a new pastor I went to a church that had a significant outreach ministry among older people. There were a number of activities running and the work was vibrant and expanding. It presented exciting opportunities, but we needed someone to oversee it and plan it. I went to visit a recently retired person who had held significant roles in the denomination and told of the challenge this opportunity presented. I'll never forget the response I got, "Andrew, I've spent my working life serving the church, and in my retirement I'm going to live for myself." I was absolutely flabbergasted! It had never dawned on me that someone could spend years and years serving the church as a burden - without any of the enthusiasm and excitement of being tied up with the purposes of God... and with the whole reason for our being. It had never dawned on me that someone could so misunderstand the Christian faith that their goal in their final years on this planet was to live for themselves.

To find area of service, sense God's gifting, equip ourselves and act in a ministry that we were created for is the most satisfying thing on earth! I know there is a cost with every ministry – we get pushed out of our comfort zone - and there are always times when it is not fun. But you just can't match the fulfilment that comes from doing what you believe to be God's will, being the hands and feet of Christ.

In our daily experience of serving God the challenge is to:

- acknowledge our dependence on him
- and seek to **find our gifts & ministries**
- and then **begin to use them to help one another**  
looking to God for that divine dimension
- *his* words to speak
- and *his* strength to serve

And, if it's fulfilling for us, it is also attractive for others. The first quote that I ever learnt of John Wesley's (as a Baptist boy in my twenties) was this: "Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles to watch you burn." That's the history of the Methodist tradition.

Amen.

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