

# Laggan and Newtonmore

## Church of Scotland

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**20th October 2019**

Ephesians 4:1-16

I am beginning this morning by giving you advance notice that next week we will use exactly the same Epistle reading as we have today, from Ephesians chapter 4. This passage is a key one for churches which are trying to feel their way forward into unknown territory – which is all churches, but not all of them realise it. It is key because it talks about the church and about what we have in common and what we need each other to do.

What we have in common is that we share the same Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, and that we are called to act as one body not as lots of individuals. What we have in common is that we worship the same Lord in the same faith united in the one baptism and knowing the same one God as our Father. So we have a lot in common. We are going to come back to that next week.

This week we are going to look at how we are called to work together. Paul is talking to a church, which is finding its feet. It doesn't know what to make of the fact that it is made up of individuals who are all different. So a church a bit like us then. And Paul says that although we have so much in common, yet we are still different and we need to be, because none of us have all the gifts needed to function as a church – needed to take forward God's work in the world, to spread his kingdom of counter-cultural acceptance and love, forgiveness and trust. And, helpfully, he identifies the main categories of gifts that God's Spirit awakens in Christians, all of which are needed in any church body.

Some, he says are apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and some teachers. And he doesn't say that some are none of these. No he says that everyone has some of these gifts. Each of us, everyone here, we all have gifts within these categories. So let's see what the headings mean.

When we think of Apostles, we tend to think of Jesus' 12 disciples and perhaps Paul – Paul certainly thought of himself as an apostle. An Apostle

is someone who is sent. That's what the word means. But in that case in one way or another we are all apostles. What is this special calling about?

If you think back to the first days of the church, the apostles, who travelled from place to place and the apostles who stayed in Jerusalem were instruments of change. Where no one had heard of Jesus, they told about him; where there was no church, they brought church into being. They were catalysts, who by their presence disrupted what was normal and brought new ideas and new ways of understanding and serving God to light. Apostles are catalysts and they commission new things. Every church needs an apostle or two. It needn't be the minister, but we all need someone to push us forward. The question apostles want us not to forget is "Are we living out our calling?"

Prophets? What about prophets? The most common use of the word assumes that prophecy is to do with telling the future. We think the prophet will be able to look ahead and see what is going to happen. And that is sometimes true. But if you look at the Biblical prophets – and there are plenty to choose from, from Moses and Elijah to John the Baptist, with centuries of prophetic voices in between, then you will see that looking into the future was a small side-line for them – if they did this at all. The prophets are concerned with speaking to the present situation. They are good at seeing things as they are and naming them, and suggesting that we might like to address what is going wrong. Not popular – so often not popular at all, because the expose things that most of us have been comfortable allowing to remain hidden. And sometimes the prophets use their own lives to embody God's message to his people, which can leave the non-prophetically gifted feeling that the prophets are setting themselves up as better than the rest, when really all they are trying to do is give a lead. We can see this in non-church culture as well, when, for example, campaigners for Climate Protection exemplify life-style changes that most of us would rather we didn't have to make – think of Greta Thurnberg sailing to a conference in New York rather than board a plane. And think of the hate-mail she received. Prophets are not popular, but they are necessary. The prophets want to ask us "Are we hearing and responding to God's voice?"

Evangelists we think we know about. They are the Billy Grahams, yes? They are the people who can talk about Jesus and tell people why they should believe in him. And yes, they are, but there are not many Billy Grahams or those like him as the public receptivity to mass rallies has weakened, and his way of going about being an evangelist was pretty niche. But think about him, for a minute. Or any other evangelists you may have encountered. However they went about it, what they were trying to do was to get people excited and inspired to discover more about Jesus, and

ultimately to begin to follow him. Exciting and inspiring is meat and drink to the evangelists and we need them, because without them we could forget that the message of the gospel is not humdrum, not commonplace, but radically exciting and meant to inspire us to live in a quite different way from the rest of the world. Evangelists ask the church “How can we be sure that new people are being brought into the fulness of faith in Christ?”

Teachers are fairly easy to think about. I identify more as a teacher than as any of the other types of gifting. Teachers interpret – they interpret the Scripture and they interpret what they hear others saying and they pass it on. There is more than one way of doing this – it doesn’t have to be in a sermon. Indeed increasingly sermons are becoming less effective as teaching in the wider world becomes less talk and chalk and more interactive and discovery led. But even in that kind of learning you need the teachers to ask the right question, and to point towards the learning that needs to be uncovered. Teachers interpret and inform. They ask us “Is the word of God coming alive and being lived out in the community?”

And lastly the shepherds. If I were to pause here and ask you which of these types of gifting you would identify with, I’m pretty sure most of you would turn out to think of yourselves as shepherds. Shepherds guide and guard the flock. Shepherds are those who look out for others, and care for them. They are what the church is best at doing and being. “Shepherds as “How are we caring for others and creating community to nurture and support all?” Hooray for the shepherds.

In fact hooray for all these types of gifts. We are going to pause there and sing hymn 198 Let us build a house – and as we do so, think about the different kinds of gifts needed to make the vision in that hymn a reality.

As we think about the various types of gifts that all churches are given and called to exercise, we must admit that if there is tendency for the pastoral gifts to predominate, this may say something about the culture of our church.

People who are called to be apostles, being catalysts for something new, are less likely to feel free to use their gifts if the church culture is risk-averse, unwilling to dare to fail or to take on new ideas.

Prophetic voices are easily stifled if we do not give them a place where they can be heard, and listen to them carefully.

Evangelists can be misunderstood within a church community, because they will in fact prefer to be with people who are not Christian, so that they can tell them; and so the church community needs to help them do this,

while still helping them to find a place for learning and fellowship to keep their own faith fresh and strong. For a small church that can be a challenge.

If teachers are to find their place within the church, they need to be allowed to be teachers and not pastors, and the church needs to learn in various ways and be prepared to act on what we learn.

And the pastors who may feel most at home, need to be encouraged to care from love and in freedom, not from duty. We should recognise too that this is a major calling and gifting for many – God knows that to care for each other well, we need lots of mutual caring. But the pastoral caring people need, in some churches more than in others, to be encouraged to go to the people on the margins, not just to those who are obvious.

All of us are called and all of us are gifted, but we are not all the same. Sometimes we do not recognise where our true gifting lies, because we want to be one thing or another. It is not a bad thing to think this through in prayer, reflecting on where God has used you and what kinds of gifts you were using then. It is not a bad thing to discuss it with someone who knows you well and can be honest.

Because if as a church we are going to keep moving forward, keep learning how to be God's people for this time and place, able to take God's love to those around us as the love and good news of God, then we need everyone to play their part, and to work out what that part is to be. And we need to give room for gifts to be used and expressed, even if that means that the way we see ourselves or do things changes.

I find it a very powerful, hopeful and encouraging thought that all of us are called, and no one is a passenger in the church. I hope you do as well. God grant that each of us learns how together we can serve our Lord and Saviour. Amen.