

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

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Ephesians 4:1-16

Psalm 133

When we read this passage last week, we looked at the different categories of gifts that Paul says God's Spirit gives to the church. Of course we need to remember that he is not talking about the vast universal church (which in his day was neither vast nor universal anyway) but to a local congregation, small and starting out. We saw that some people have gifts which are apostolic, being catalysts and bringing about new things. Some have prophetic gifts, speaking God's word to the present situation as it changes. Some have gifts which are to do with evangelism, seeking out those who have not heard or have heard but not understood. Some have gifts in the teaching line, teaching Scripture, teaching what they have learned, and some have gifts which are caring and pastoral, helping keep God's flock safe and cared for. And all of us have gifts which fit into these categories, but none of us is the same.

It is the none of us is the same that we need to explore today. Very often when we read this part of the letter to the Ephesians, we home in on the gifts and callings, wondering where we fit, wondering that God should provide so richly, or maybe wondering if he really still does. We focus on that, and we maybe skip over the fact that before he gets to outlining the gifting of God's people, he urges them to live in peace and unity. He begs them to live up to their calling as Christians, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." You see, Paul has a pretty good idea of human nature. He knows his own temptations and he knows what we all can be tempted towards. And whenever you get a bunch of people in a situation where they are working together and ordering their lives together, and pursuing a common goal, you also ironically but surely, can get envy and dissent and rank-pulling. Whenever people try to work together there is a tendency for them to fall out. It is the way of our human nature either to seek to set ourselves up or to hide

because we are afraid of being noticed and censured. And Paul, who has devoted years of his life to establishing churches, does not want them to become like every other human institution. They are to make every effort to live in peace and unity with each other, and Paul is under no illusions that it will take effort. It won't just happen.

It didn't just happen then and it hasn't just happened since. Sometimes the church and churches have fallen out spectacularly, while other times they have allowed themselves to act in the ways of the world, valuing some people or gifts over others, and making some people more important or influential, or allowing them to set themselves up as in some way better. Since every group of more than about 10 people, maybe 12 (like the disciples) needs to have someone or someone's who can give a lead when needed, it is fatally easy for church to begin to look like the world. It takes effort if we are to be different.

I wonder if in the first century when Paul and Peter wrote of the need for unity they could have any idea about the divisions that were to rift the church in the coming centuries. They probably couldn't, and in any case they thought that the second coming of Christ was near, not still centuries away. The divisions which loomed largest for the early church were those of ethnicity: Jews versus Gentile, and versus, meaning against, was sometimes the right word. They could never have seen the great division of the church into Eastern rite and Western rite, which happened in the 11th century. The circumstances which led to it were not to do with doctrine but with politics, and began when in 800 Charlemagne was crowned the Holy Roman Emperor, which those in the east of Europe saw as a slap in the face to their candidate, and so to them. Paul could not have imagined a time when Christianity and government was so entwined. Nor, maybe, would he have wanted to.

But that division and all those which have flowed since then, in East and in West, have been to do with leadership, to do with who calls the shots and who is in charge and what types of gifts and talents are valued in the church. Just this week I have had three examples of it laid before me. I spent three days in Edinburgh this week interviewing people who would like to lead, as conveners or vice conveners, the two new bodies (forums is what they are being called, at least for now) which will replace the councils of the Church of Scotland. Faith impact, they are called, and Faith nurture. And then I was involved with sorting the applications of those who would like to serve on these bodies – more applications than places to fill. And as we interviewed for conveners and sifted the paperwork for members in fact what we were doing was evaluate the gifts of the people concerned.

After one day when I was involved in interviewing 9 people I met Jennifer for dinner, and she told me about how some of the Christian young people in the Christian Union at her university, which she helps to lead, sometimes pick on her and mock her for going to a non-traditional church. I found that profoundly depressing, not because she is my daughter - she's also a tough cookie – but because I did hope that the next generation of Christians would do better than we have. But still some gifts and callings are being valued above others.

And then in conversation with my son, who is not given to theological musing, he mentioned that the parents of a friend who is a Roman Catholic would rather she undertake some Catholic relief work than join a non-denominational work. And he burst out “But it's all the same God and Jesus.” Profoundly true and just what Paul was trying to say.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

All of us are given gifts and because we are all different, and because none of us is Christ, our gifts and how we show and use them will not be the same. And this is what makes being church hard. This so why there is no blueprint for being a successful church. It is built of individuals and God made none of us alike. There is no blueprint. No two churches are or should be the same. We don't all fit into a Church of Scotland pattern, and indeed I am grateful that the Church of Scotland doesn't impose too strict a pattern upon us, but gives us flexibility in how we order our worship or how we use our differently gifted people in organising or in ministering to our parish.

I know that when I speak to you about the gifts God has given you, there are those who would rather that my words should not apply to them. There are those who are happy just turning up, but don't want to be seen to put themselves forward in any way. That's our upbringing and background speaking. How many of us were brought up not to boast, and with parents who didn't like to speak of their pride in their children, at least to the child in question? And even volunteering to do or try something was seen to be a bit forritsome and pushing. These are the characteristics of many generations of Scots, though perhaps that culture is changing as we learn to affirm our kids. But for the adults in the church it can be a real problem being told that you have gifts, and gifts given by God himself. Why would God give you any gifts? Who are you that God should think to do that?

If we are to be a church which is moving forward on a path of renewal then this reluctance to use all and for all to be used is something that we need to

address. We are to make every effort to address this, because it won't be easy. We are to remember all that we have in common and how that is more, far more than the human differences we see in each other, or the differences in how God has given us. When Paul talks about the various categories of gifts, he says that they are given us because Christ made the effort to descend to be with us as one of us, and then made the effort by his death and resurrection to bring us even into God's presence. That makes every gift of God to his church very precious indeed. They are not throwaway presents, but valuable gifts which should be treasured. And the best way, indeed the only way to treasure such gifts is to make sure that they are used and that there are opportunities for them to be used.

We need the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the teachers and the shepherds. We need them all, if we are to keep growing as a church, growing in maturity and growing in numbers; growing in how we bring the good news of Jesus to impact our community. It is by valuing the gifts God has given to each that we will avoid becoming just another human institution, swayed, as Paul says, by winds of doctrine (and so running the risk of only listening to those who we agree with on all points, even though we have so much more in common than what divides). It is by valuing the gifts God has given to each that we will avoid being swayed by people's trickery, by craftiness and deceitful scheming, which seems to be the fate of so many bodies, from community councils to parliaments.

I do not think that we have achieved this balance of valuing and using the gifts of God in each one. I think there is a fair bit of work to be done on this. Until we make the effort, and make the effort to live in peace and humility while we do so, then we will be a church limping along on what we have always been. When we realise all that God has given us, we will rise to meet the challenges of serving him with confidence, knowing we work in his name and in his way.