

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 9th August 2020 – “What is the Church?” (2) – “Diversity for the good of all”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

This podcast is the second in a series of 5 reflections on the subject - “*What is the Church?*”.

That, I suspect, was an easier question to answer before lockdown happened. If someone had asked us which Church we belonged to we almost certainly would have pointed them to some physical destination... a building, albeit a building that was used regularly by people.

And, to a certain extent, there is nothing wrong in that way of looking at things. As we were thinking about last week buildings might sometimes be troublesome to look after but they are where people meet and worship.

But then, of course, Covid 19 closed the doors of the sanctuary and those who met within the walls of the building could no longer do so and we were set the task of making church work in different and innovative ways. At the heart of that new way of being has been the simple recognition that the Church is, at heart, about people and not buildings.

One day we will, of course, enter those buildings again – and that will be a special day indeed - but hopefully when we do it will be with a deepened sense of the community of faith and the people that hold the church together.

So, the Church is about people. That was last week’s key thought – something we will return to briefly in a short while before we go on, this week, to think about the diverse gifts that each of us brings to the life of the Church.

This series of reflections is based on the Hymn in CH4 (no 204) which is entitled “*I am the Church*” and this week we reach verse 2 of that hymn which goes like this, “*We’re many kinds of people with many kinds of faces, all colours and all ages, too, from all kinds of places*”.

But more of that in a moment. First of all, though, shall we pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

Loving Father of us all, we thank you that you have called us to be your people. Through your infinite grace and mercy, you have welcomed us into the fellowship of your people, into a fellowship where we can use our gifts and talents for the good of all.

We thank you for the fellowship that we share with each other in these very different circumstances, a fellowship sustained by our continuing prayer and our common sense of belonging one with another.

Help us, we pray, in those moments when we struggle to show and live that sense of fellowship. Enable us to show to the world what it means to be part of your people.

Help us to discover anew the different avenues of opportunity for service where we might be able to bring the values of your Kingdom to the forefront.

And in those days when we are tempted to hold back our gifts and talents remind us that it is what we share that binds us together and not just our solitary moments, important as they might sometimes be.

Help us to give as well as to receive, to put in as much as we take out, to serve as we would be served.

And help us, we pray, to be your people together united in our diversity, that we may seek the good of all.

Hear us now as we bring these our prayers in the words of the Lord's prayer saying:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading – 1st Corinthians chapter 12 verses 1 to 11

Our reading today comes from the 12th Chapter of Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth reading verses 1 to 11. It will be read for us today by Janice Bulloch.

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. 2 You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. 3 Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 8 To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, 10 to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

Thank you to Janice for sharing that reading with us.

Before we take time to look at the reading that Janice has just read for us it might be worth just a brief excursion back to our thoughts from last week when we considered another letter that Paul wrote this time, not to the church at Corinth, but to the Church at Ephesus.

Last week, we looked at quite a tricky passage from the second chapter of Ephesians where Paul explores what it means to be part of the people of God. To do this Paul begins to reflect upon how it was that acts such as circumcision for men was a way of entering into the Jewish faith. It was normal practice for all Jewish baby boys to be circumcised. It was also the established way in which even adult men, if they were converting to Judaism, entered into that faith too.

This act traced its origins back to the original covenant that God had made with Abraham in Genesis chapter 17 and is, of course, still practiced amongst the Jewish community today.

It was a physical sign and symbol of belonging. However, as the gospel of Jesus Christ spread further and further there were some, including Paul, who questioned whether this was a practice that needed to continue in order to follow Jesus himself.

If a man was to come to faith in Jesus Christ, and they had not previously been a Jew, were they not also expected to undergo this ritual?

Increasingly, Paul begins to question this drawing people, as he does, to the core of the gospel that on the cross whatever it was that was often used to divide people has been overcome by the cross and resurrection of Jesus. This was God, says Paul, opening up a door so that all – regardless of their background and previous faith connections – could become part of the people of God.

God through the Holy Spirit, says Paul, is building his people into a temple not made of stones and mortar but rather through the sharing of their faith and by placing Jesus Christ at the heart of what they do.

Inevitably, this view of Paul meant – at a practical level – that they were left without any buildings to worship in. As the years passed, it became increasingly difficult for the first followers of Jesus to remain as worshippers within their local synagogue or at the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem itself.

Increasing persecution and isolation of these new Christians meant that they had to find new ways of growing their faith, new ways of being the church and new ways of being God's people.

At a practical level it also meant that when the apostles, including Paul, visited different areas – and Paul went physically further than most – that they had no buildings to turn to and no physical places to build their fellowships unless it was in someone's house or in a central meeting place outside.

Paul has to find some way here to demonstrate how they could still call themselves "the Church" but not have a building anymore in which they could welcome other people. That would come in time, but for the time being that new and fledgling church would have to be almost exclusively about people and the gospel.

Paul had no doubt already had this sort of conversation with the fledgling church at Corinth, who are at the centre of our reading this morning. In fact, throughout his letter to the Corinthians Paul doesn't really speak about buildings at all. He has, however, a lot to say about people and about the gospel.

The particular problem that presented itself in Corinth was one of division, a division that was caused over a leadership issue.

Right back at the beginning of 1st Corinthians chapter 1 Paul takes the people to task over the way they had divided their allegiance to one leader or another. In this case, in his absence, some of the Corinthian Christians had started to show a greater respect for the leadership of a man called Apollos. In effect, Apollos was the man on the spot whereas Paul was a distant figure left trying to lead them from a far away place.

In some ways it was inevitable that such a division would occur. It is easier to be led by someone who is there than by someone who is not. Even if Apollos has not sought such a division, he was clearly the sort of person that they felt could lead them on the next step of their journey.

Paul is quick to point out to them, however, that neither Apollos nor Paul himself achieved anything close to what Jesus himself did for them all.

Here's what Paul says at 1st Corinthians chapter 1 and verses 12 and 13: "*One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'* *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul?"*

It is this division that has also made their journey forward a bit of a wayward one. It has led them, quite simply, to stop respecting each other as they should. This has caused their leadership and sense of togetherness to start seriously fraying at the edges.

When people stop listening to each other they start doing things their own way and they begin to forget the original reason why they even came into being in the first place.

They needed, says Paul, to begin understanding what it is that each of them bring to the proverbial table... the skills and talents that each of them had to offer and that's where our reading today from the first 11 verses of 1st Corinthians chapter 12 place their central focus.

So, what does Paul say to them?

Well the very first thing he says is something he emphasises throughout our reading, that the gifts they have – the spiritual gifts they have – find their origin in the Spirit of God. No gift that they exercise in the fellowship of believers is separate from that which God, through his Holy Spirit, has given to them.

If they can do something for the Kingdom of God, it is because the Holy Spirit has empowered them.

Not that everyone, of course, sees things that way. My late Uncle John, who was a Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Studies (and one of my former teachers at New College) had a favourite word to describe excessive pride in our own abilities – it was the word "*Hubris*" which the dictionary describes as "*excessive pride and self confidence*"

The old Greek myths tell us something about Hubris too... often the frequently fatal flaw in the characters of Greek mythology was a sense of being indestructible – a bit like Achilles displaying his pride in his so called immortality until someone shoots him in his heel, his one vulnerable spot.

In films too – even James Bond films (which you know I love!) – the villain is often beset by feelings of uber confidence, Hubris... This is why, often as the film is nearing its ending, they take Bond to the heart of their secret operations and tell him all their evil plans which will, they say will be of no use to Bond because by then he'll be long gone. It's not a clever thing to do. Bond always find a way of escaping.

In one of the Pierce Brosnan Bond films – Goldeneye - we encounter a computer hacker by the name of Boris. Boris can hack into any computer in the world and each time he does he jumps out of his seat and shouts "*I am invincible!*", except that at the end he manages to blow himself up (and everything around him) by misusing an explosive ballpoint pen that he has stolen from Bond himself.

Never trust a pen that James Bond uses... They are rarely for writing with! Hubris indeed!

If our very faith comes from God himself then so too do the gifts we have.

Which leads to our second main point today that if Paul says that our gifts come from the Holy Spirit then it is so that we can use them, as he puts it at verse 7 of our reading, for the "*Common good*"

Here's the whole of that verse, "*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*".

If we have gifts, says Paul, we are to use them for the good of all.

The common good? What do we mean we speak of the Common Good?

Well, in a really interesting article that I came across this past week, which was written by scholars from the University of Santa Barbara in the United States, some writers explore what the common good might be and some of the challenges that surround understanding it and putting it into practice.

Broadly speaking, they argue, when we speak of the common good we mean that the systems that operate in our world and the way in which we are led by our leaders should reflect the importance of all people. So, for example, if we are ill, we should be able to find a way to be helped that does not depend on how rich or poor we may be.

In these recent months of lockdown many have come to give thanks for the equality of our own care system.

Equally, the common good speaks to us about minimising the difference between the haves and the have nots.

Although putting that into action isn't as easy as we might think. There are some, ponder these writers, who might not feel so enamoured with giving a helping hand to someone who is different from them or who dismiss support for someone who doesn't seem to want to give back in return for what they have been given.

No one said, of course, it would be easy. It certainly wasn't going to be easy for the church at Corinth to begin turning itself around. It takes time to build up trust when it is lost and start building towards a common goal and a common good.

Paul roots all of this, of course, in Jesus Christ.

On our own bringing our diverse gifts together for the common good will be far from a straightforward task.

We also recognise, however, that our gifts are from God and that Jesus is the perfect example of someone who knew what the “common good” really meant and who lived that out in his daily life. We have, therefore, the greatest example to follow.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Eternal God, we thank for the different gifts that you give to us and that you build your church, not just upon people, but upon the talents which they can bring to the common good of all. We thank you for the daily opportunities that present themselves for serving your world, a world which we now pray for.

We pray for those who feel that they have little to offer others, who have no sense of the gifts which they possess. Help them to understand that we each have something to offer and that the things we offer can be simple as well as dramatic.

At the same time, we pray for those who know the skills and talents that they have but who celebrate those gifts as if they were for them alone or for whom a sense of over confidence has become the norm. Grant them an appropriate humility as well as an awareness of the one from who all good gifts come.

We pray for our leaders at this time as they struggle to make the right decisions in the face of the ongoing challenges of Covid 19. We give thanks for the many positive signs of things stabilising out, but we are also acutely aware of the challenges that lie ahead and the fragility of those seeming gains. Give those who lead us the gift of compassionate leadership, wisdom as well as knowledge and a desire to seek the common good.

We pray for your church – those who lead it and those who serve within it. At this unusual time grant to your people a steady spirit and a gentle faith that will hold us together.

And finally, we pray for those who are unwell at the moment – those at home or in hospital, those who are lonely or who have faced, or are facing, a time of loss.

In the silence we pray for them that they may be comforted by you – the God who seeks the good of us all.

And hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in Jesus name. Amen.

Benediction

As we close this time of worship may we continue to share the gifts we have been given.

Let us seek the building up of the Body of Christ.

Let us also carry the Holy that we worship into the world around us.

And may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – bless and be with you this day and forevermore, Amen.