

One of the key parts of my former role was working with three organists in a team. Organists are amazingly talented people. Day after day my colleagues would craft the most sublime sounds from the instrument, and from the adults and children of the choir. With such gifts and talents, you would have thought that our daily life together would have been one of sheer bliss, as soothing and rousing music, offered to the glory of God in the inspiring surroundings of a great cathedral was our lifeblood and daily bread. But it was one of those colleagues who described how he had started to play the organ in church as a sixteen year old because the previous organist had fallen out with the Vicar. 'I believe that happens sometimes', he said, dryly, and it all came back. The musicians I worked with used to have all sorts of arguments and difficulties. Just having the gifts was not enough. In fact, sometimes having a gift is a problem, because it can put everything else out of perspective.

Paul writes to the churches time and again to remind them that God has given them inexpressible riches. If they look around their gatherings, their congregations, they will see that some have been raised up to be leaders, some to preach, some to administer, some to prophesy, some to make music, some to teach, some to serve, some to pray, some to speak the Word, some to heal. Paul reminds them that some might already have been talented in some areas, but the church was now exhibiting all sorts of things they could hardly have imagined. God is generous, says Paul. Look around you and see. There are fabulous things happening here because you are doing them.

I wonder how you came to be doing what you do here. Some of you will reflect that the opportunity to serve, and the means of serving, will have been a gift of God. No other explanation. And I bet that you are doing what you do because someone asked you, someone spotted that you might just be good at something. And did you think 'I couldn't possibly'? That's a gift of God too - to spot others. The gift of spotting potential - what God could do with a willing person, not what God already has, is perhaps the greatest gift of all.

What is most instructive, I think, in Paul's writing about gifts in his letters, is not the variety of gifts, nor the power of God to be at work even in people like me and you, but that he doesn't start with the gifts, but our motivation for using them. Think about 1 Corinthians, where two passages about amazing supernatural gifts from God are separated by the 'more excellent way', the way of love. Not just friendship or attraction or companionable love, but agape, sacrificial love. Without complete self giving all of the gifts will work, and might even do some good, but none of them will last. In Ephesians the same thought is expressed. Before there is anything to do with preaching or teaching or evangelism or pastoral care we are reminded to 'bear with' each other, be 'humble, meek and patient in every way' with one another, working most of all for 'unity'. We are given gifts for the purpose of service, not glory.

Which brings me to every gathering of talented and gifted people I've ever been involved in as a Christian. Just because we are gifted doesn't mean we also have the attributes to apply those gifts to make a real difference. Amazingly, some people on PCCs, or in choirs, or in leadership in churches, have different motivations. They fall out with each other over all sorts of things. Their personalities get in the way. They, we, I, are not loving and humble. That is not to say that there aren't different views, or that a full discussion of things is wrong. It's not to say that all our being together should be ecstatically blissful - in

fact the different gifts we have are meant to be different and meant to rub up against each other. Some creative disagreement is just that: it can lead to better things. It's the motivation underneath it all which is key. Are we doing this out of love, or for our own ends?

The gift we should all desire, and ask for, and grasp for, every day, every hour, is love. That binds all the other gifts together. Without it we are no better than any other grouping we belong to. In fact many of them are better than we are at getting on. Love will give us the motivation to serve others, think of them more highly than ourselves, look for their needs, give them presents and words before they know they need them. Love will give us the motivation to build a gathering which is like no other on earth: a community of people which becomes the Body of Christ. That's why God gives us gifts: to introduce Christ to others so that they can be included too. We are here to bring Good News and to proclaim love and favour from God.

So: what is your gift? What is your neighbour's gift? Have you told them? Have they told you? And how will you use it? And who will benefit?