

1 Corinthians 12: 1-13 Living in a topsy-turvy world

If six months ago someone had asked you “who are the people you consider essential in a well organised society?” I might have expected you to start somewhere close to the top – the political movers and shakers and job creators. But in recent weeks we’ve been on a journey, learning that our lives are more closely connected, we are very dependent upon each other. So, if I ask that same question, several weeks into lockdown your answer might well be different. We’ve come to a broader understanding, a renewed appreciation of the many and varied key workers who have turned up for work day after day to keep us and those we love, safe and feed and reasonably well. A variety of people, with a variety of gifts, each and every one of them an essential part in the wellbeing of all. Each and every one of them doing what they alone can do.

We see a not too dissimilar thing happening in today’s NT passage where Paul is grappling with church members at Corinth as he encourages them to broaden and appreciate the considerable variety of gifts of the Spirit which they have received. For the church was not in agreement on, nor did they have a clear understanding about, the value and use these of spiritual gifts – there was a growing rivalry between several of the members. Some claimed that they were better than others because their special gifts were more special, more important than others. Their problem was they never stopped to ask what they could do for the common good or what it was that the Spirit had equipped them to do. This is the context in which Paul finds himself as he writes in 1 Corinthians 12:1-13.

To Paul’s great credit he starts off in diplomatic mode. He doesn’t begin with a direct charge against the Corinthians, saying: “You Corinthians are an unruly lot and you’ve got this ‘gifts of the Spirit’ thing all wrong.” Rather, he says: “I do not want you to be uninformed.” By this he means they could/should have known better. He tackles the matter with velvet gloves – implying a simple lack of understanding rather than disgracing them with their spiritual one-up-man-ship.

To help them to a better understanding about the Spirit and spiritual gifts, he reminds them of their past, saying they were “enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak” (12:2). He also reminds them that they now belong to a Spirit-ruled community. Having told the Corinthians of the importance of the correct understanding about the Spirit, Paul goes on to talk about the work of the Spirit and its various gifts necessary for the church and the good of all.

Then Paul surprises us a little in verse 12, just when we think he is going to say one thing, he says something different. When I read that verse, I expect him to say: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body,

though many are one body, so it is with the church.” But that’s not what he says, instead he writes: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ.” For Paul, there is a strong connection between Christ and the Church. If you are baptized, you are ‘in Christ’. It is as simple as that. And the Church is the living out together of our ‘in-Christness’.

Paul is telling the Christians at Corinth – who are not handling their divisions very well - that the way they interact with one another, the way they cope with their differences, is actually a reflection to the wider world of how Christ responds to difference and how Christ wants to interact with the world. In other words, they need to pull their socks up – they have a responsibility to live up to.

Paul reminds us through this passage we also shoulder this responsibility: as we interact with each other, we are reflecting God in our words and our deeds. What people see of us, they see of God. We are the Body of Christ together, which is a holy calling. God has chosen us and gifted us to represent Him to the world, we are stewards together of that calling, stewards of these gifts, and we are to use them with compassion and with kindness and with love.

Every blessing, Linda