

Sermon Notes for Epiphany 2

having gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us (epistle)

In some parts of the early church, Epiphany was a season for adult baptism. This may explain the choice of readings. The gospel is one of the “manifestations” typically counted in Epiphany, but it is also appropriate to the newly baptised, who have entered into the marriage-feast of the Lamb and so receive for the first time the good wine of the kingdom. It is hard for us to imagine the joy, and we must not try to impose an artificial joy on ourselves as if it were expected of us.

The epistle is also appropriate in this context. Christianity is not an intellectual acceptance of doctrinal propositions. It is rather a decision to trust God as God has chosen in Christ to disclose himself to us. And from that decision there necessarily follows a way of life. The convert for baptism was given some account of that way in his preparation; it may have been based largely on Ecclesiasticus, that is on the practical wisdom tradition of the period between the testaments. It is only in the immediate prospect of baptism that all the details of Christian belief and Christian living were shared with the candidates.

Christianity is not simply a religion of works, then, but life in Christ is expected to issue in “those good works which thou hast prepared for us to walk in”, and, better, not just in actions but in a new motivation. The dullest Christian advice, such as the “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”, is little more than Jewish legal guidance. But the Church did not for long (if at all) read that book as scripture; it chose to find its moral inspiration from the epistles and gospels.

And so to today's epistle. Eleven chapters of intense theological argument issue in these practical instructions. Is it an anticlimax? It is also perhaps odd that these instructions are issued to people Paul does not know, has never met. All he knows is that they are a functioning Christian church. He infers their needs. That is helpful; he is trying to address the general circumstances of any church, and the only significant difference between the Romans and us is that we do not have Jewish members and their particular needs. Some other epistles are more rooted in the particular circumstances of churches well known to Paul.

Paul thinks in terms of the church. The individual Christian is not the starting point. Mostly the verbal construction in this passage is plural (occasionally a generalising singular). This is how we live together as a body. The key to the whole passage is “having gifts”. This is true of all of them. Not a ministry and a passive following, but a certainty that they are all redeemed and by virtue of their baptism have gifts given to them. Some of those gifts are particular; some are general and pass into general duties as a result.

Paul does not know what form the ministry had in Rome. It seems that Rome still did not have a bishop (in our modern sense) at the start of the second century. It was not any the less a church for that. But he knows that God will have given to some the ministerial gifts, and these gifts are to be exercised (and, logically, respected by other Christians). Gifts of leadership are not it seems the same as ministry (and we cannot assert that there is only one leader or teacher unless there is also only one “that giveth” or “that sheweth mercy”). The all-purpose priest in sole charge of a parish is not Paul's assumption. Perhaps the particular gift which should disturb us is “prophecy”. Paul assumes it will be found in Rome; certainly he had to regulate it in Corinth, so probably he taught his churches to expect it. By the early third century the church assumed that it was no longer given. But of course the church cannot forbid God to grant any of his gifts when he chooses!

To have a gift and not use it would be wrong (see the parable of the talents). And so with regard to the general gifts, they are also general duties. They are also clear enough not to need explanation. I have doubts about “in business” - RV “in diligence”, RSV “in zeal”. The last of these is the mechanical rendering but I suspect this is a word whose meaning in first century Greek we have lost. (You may ponder “Zeal-of-the-land Busy” and his “Banbury-vapours” - my home town!)

From Gore in his “practical exposition” of Romans: “The life into which the individual's faith in Jesus admits him is the life of a community, and its virtues are the virtues of community life. The strengthened individuality is to go to enrich an organised society. No individual member is without his special endowment. What every individual Christian has to do is to realize his own gift and correspond to it. There is something which each man can realize and impart. The Church is the poorer if he holds back or fails to stir up this gift of his own, and on the other hand he incurs the peril of presumption if he ventures beyond it.”