

Trinity 10

diversities of gifts (Epistle)

Saint Paul does not think there is one standard issue Christian. I suppose no reasonable person does either, and yet so much of the disasters we have faced in the last half century come from that sort of assumption. Women cannot be proper Christians unless they can be bishops? It is bad logic, since almost all men will not be bishops either; whether God calls some women to the threefold ministry is a debatable topic, but I do not think the case is enhanced by calling in notions of equality. No, there are diversities of gifts; and the essence of a gift is that it is not given by rule. A gift is not an entitlement. That said, we do not allege that God distributes his gifts at random. But his purposes may be hard for us to discern. Saint Paul rightly implies they are given for the needs of the church, not rewards for good conduct, status, gender, learning or anything else.

But the church we have does not seem to reflect Saint Paul's description. We do not have this variety of gifts. Mostly, we have the single priest, notionally but rather distantly (in the West) subject to a bishop, and with a diaconate which is merely a career step, not a ministry in its own right. The priest is expected to be omni-competent, and that not just in relation to one congregation but often and increasingly to several. And that priest has been trained (by whatever means favoured) away from any congregation. He is an external expert, just like all the experts used by the state, though less well trained than a doctor or teacher.

We have not been able to change this much in continuing Anglicanism. There were reasons – we thought we had to seem like what the Church of England had been. But the result is few clergy, badly trained, and the same processes of decline that we see in the state religion. Probably it is now too late to change this. All we can do is to give that limited ministry while it is needed, and to record our mistakes in the hope that the Church of God will learn from them.

Not that it would be a better policy to impose Saint Paul's gifts by rule. Rule has a place, in recognising that a gift has been given and in coordinating the way the many gifts are exercised. But God will not give us gifts of wisdom (or of healing or anything else) because we legislate for them. Much harm is done indeed by ignoring them when given. Motions in a general synod are no substitute for theological thinking by those who have gifts of wisdom and knowledge. Yet, just as Paul hints, even genuine gifts have to be regulated lest they run riot.

The Church of England and the continuing churches believe that the threefold ministry is essential and scriptural. I doubt that there is a conclusive proof of this in Scripture, though it is arguable that the New Testament shows a process of change which naturally (and only very shortly later) led to the Bishop in charge of a single congregation, with a body of presbyters who could deputise but generally were a council of advice, and with a body of deacons mainly for administrative purposes such as support of the poor. Ironically, this system, which rapidly became universal, changed in the fourth century in favour of the modern one (the solo priest) which I have described. The same orders, but not the same activities. And increasingly the wider range of gifts described by Saint Paul vanished. The dogmatic belief that prophecy would no longer be given by God (so all claims to it are at best deluded and at worst demonic) is an instance. But however good the threefold ministry, and however much better it could be implemented than it now generally is, still it is not the full diversity of gifts which Saint Paul takes for granted.

And because “priesthood” is distinctive and separated out, the natural consequence is that all gifts outside it are undervalued. This is bad theology. The Old Testament values the skills of those who made the Tabernacle; priests are important, but not to the exclusion of many other gifts. And not the least gift is to be the ordinary lay person. We are not all “special”, though God may give to anybody special gifts. But we are all valuable in the sight of God.

“But in the Church of God, that is, among Christians, all distinctions are nothing else but the different callings of the one Spirit, by which they are in love to serve one another and to serve God; or different powers given to different members for the benefit of each other, as all parts of that one Body, Which is Christ. Now the effect of these two ways of looking on things, whether as in ourselves and by ourselves, or only as members one of another, is as opposite as light and darkness. So far as we consider the gifts of God as something of our own, we are exalted in our own eyes; so far as we consider them as parts of a stewardship for which we are accountable, we must be more and more humbled under a sense of them.” (Williams commentary on the Epistle)