

Christ Church, Chineham

16th March 2014

Service in the body

When I lived in London in my early 20s I once went to the doctor complaining of exhaustion. Yes, I know you are meant to wait until your 40s and 50s before doing that, but I was an early developer! He asked about my job, yes, a demanding job in the city; he asked me about my spare time. Church treasurer. Occasional preacher. Church housing association treasurer, service leader, youth management committee etc. What type of church? – the doctor asked. A Baptist church I said. Stop, said the doctor, I know exactly the problem, I was brought up in a Baptist church; 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people.

There are very good reasons in scripture why the church is portrayed as a place of humble loving service, each dependent upon the other, each person using the gifts which the Lord has bestowed upon them in the service of Christ and his people. It is this dynamic which makes the church what it is; a new community in Christ. That is what we will explore this morning. So, our themes will be:

- The call to sacrificial service (12:1-2)
- The nature of the church (12:3-5)

- The grace and the gifts of God (12:6)
- The individual gifts (12:7-8)

The call to sacrificial service

The first word in our passage, in v3, is ‘for’ or ‘because,’ or ‘therefore,’ or ‘as a consequence of.’ Hence the reasons for what comes in our passage of Romans 12:3-8 lie in the preceding verses. So we need to at least glance at that which comes before. What we see in v1 of Romans 12 is a call to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Now there is something very powerful in putting together two words of opposite meaning; deafening silence, irregular pattern, open secret...and so, living sacrifice. That which is sacrificed is dead and in the bible offered to God to satisfy him; the teaching of the New Testament is that because the final sacrifice has been made by Jesus Christ upon the cross, our call is to replicate that in our lives. And the test of this living sacrifice – that it is holy and pleasing to God, that it does not conform to this world, that our minds are transformed and that it accords with God’s will. And so all that follows comes from this, sacrificial service, not for its own sake, but because it models God’s character and reflects his will. Sacrificial service because it leads to changed lives and in the church a transformed community.

The nature of the church

Hence, as we turn then to understanding the church, v3 makes more sense – ‘for by the grace given me I say to every one of you; do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.’ I am not God’s gift to preaching, you are not the Lord’s leading prophet, or pastoral visitor or even encourager. Rather, v3 continues, ‘but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.’ The church is not a place for boasting but for service. If we can keep with the sober judgements of ourselves we will create a holier and healthier place for the gifts of service of all God’s people.

The bible uses several images for the church; the vine, the bride, the body. The comparison of the church to the body is used in a number of places but in slightly different ways. In Ephesians and Colossians the reference is to ‘the body of Christ’ with the emphasis on Christ being the head of the church – the vertical relationship. Here, however, the emphasis is on being one with another because we are all in Christ and under Christ – the horizontal relationship. So the comparison, in vv4-5, is that just as the body has many members or parts, each with a different function, so in Christ, many of us make up the one body and we belong to each other, but we have, v6,

different gifts. There is something here about the nature and the community of the church. We are inter-dependent, not independent; we are formed and shaped by Christ and his will; not free agents advocating whatever takes our whim; and, we serve one another in humility; not lord it over each other. We serve because Christ served. We are living sacrifices because Christ died for us.

The grace and the gifts

So, let’s just pursue the relationship in v6 between grace and gifts. There are two important words in v6 before we turn to the gifts themselves. Those words are *grace* and *given*. These words link back to the body being united under Christ and having a sober judgement of ourselves. We receive gifts from Christ not because we have reached a particular standard of achievement but that in his *grace* and love he has bestowed them upon us. We should exercise sober judgement over our own abilities because these gifts have been *given*, not earned. And so we have a picture of a God, holy and true, but whom in his love and grace pours out his gifts upon us, that we may humbly serve and the church of Christ built up.

The individual gifts

So then, let's look at the gifts mentioned here. There are, in the New Testament, several lists of spiritual gifts; for example in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians as well as here. In total there are some 20 different gifts referred to in these three passages. Hence, v6, states for us an obvious fact; 'we have different gifts,' but all are given to us 'according to grace.' In other words not only do all the gifts not reside in one person, we all have different gifts, they are spread about. We know from Ephesians that the purpose of God giving us his gifts is they are meant for equipping the saints and building up the church; sowing, growing and proclaiming. Not only do these gifts not all reside in one person they also don't just reside in the 20% my doctor mentioned some 30 years ago; they are spread across all the Lord's people and all his people should use them humbly in serving the Lord.

Now there are many different takes on these gifts. Are some supernatural and others not so? Are some relevant only to the time of the apostles and others universal? Well, maybe those are questions for another occasion; for now let me just run through the list we have in Romans 12:6-8. The list that follows is a mix of what you might call leadership type gifts, teaching, leading, and

gifts of service, serving, encouraging, showing mercy. They are intermingled and not distinguished between those that are more important and those that are less so, and similarly not distinguished between those that belong to the holders of certain offices and everyone else. They come to all of us in the grace of God and our response to that should be to serve the Lord with the gifts we have been given.

First, then prophesy. What is prophesy? Prophesy is speaking the word of the Lord to his people. There are three kinds of prophesy. First, the prophecy of the Old Testament which stands as part of the authoritative revealed word of God and cannot be added to or taken away from. That sort of prophecy cannot be repeated today. Second, the preaching of that authoritative word to us today. The preaching of the bible is truly a speaking out of God's word. It stirs the heart, feeds the soul, transforms our lives. Thirdly, words, encouragements, dreams and so on, given to any of the Lord's people, not as authoritative revelations, but to challenge and build up his church, but these offerings are to be weighed and tested (1 Cor 14:29) to ensure fidelity to the revealed truth and to protect against false prophets. We see the second and third types of prophecy in the New Testament and in the church today as a gift of God.

Second, serving. To humbly serve the Lord and his people, without complaint, because it is the Lord we serve, and to serve his people is not a burden, but a privilege.

Third, teaching. This is the awesome responsibility of teaching God's word. Not sharing our own inclinations or political judgements or esoteric schemes, but expounding God's word. All of it. Struggling with the parts that are harder to understand to discover his will rather than replacing it with the inventions of our own hearts. In the early church there were no books which people could read to absorb the truths of the faith, some individual manuscripts of the bible, but many could not read, and so those early disciples were deeply dependent upon those called to be teachers; that is why such weight is given in the bible to those called to exercise this gift, it was an awesome responsibility, people's very spiritual destiny was in their hands, hence why it was so important that the teachers held to the truths of the faith, as it is today. There is an enormous dearth in the church of good, old-fashioned bible teaching; the sort that has changed the world and can do so again.

Fourth, encouraging, whether of the exhorting ('come on, keep going, you're doing great,') or consoling type ('stay calm, keep

faithful, the Lord is with you,'), both are needed. I can tell you from all my years of pastoral ministry that every congregation I have served in, including this one, have had a number of people who have the gift of encouragement. And it's a vital gift and a vital ministry; not least because every congregation also has folk who definitely don't have the gift of encouragement!

Fifth, giving. Giving, of course, is not just financial, though it will include that. I think the giving that the Lord requires is the giving of ourselves – the living sacrifice. This giving is to be generous, perhaps a better translation would be single-minded. In other words there are within congregations those called to devote themselves single-mindedly to the welfare of others, including financial support as necessary.

Sixth, leading. Leading note, near the bottom of the list here.

Remember also about sober judgement of ourselves. Leadership is another form of serving, and in this list comes between giving and showing mercy. The purpose is to build up the congregation of the Lord's people. So it is leadership, but a leadership of service. It is, we are told to be exercised diligently; because it is the leadership of the Lord's people which is at stake. Diligence, in contrast to laziness; diligence in contrast to a carefree attitude; diligence in

respect of faithfulness, proclaiming the gospel, hard work, love, passion and compassion.

Seventh, showing mercy. To show mercy to those in need, the sick, the suffering, is not a grim task for the Christian, but one of joy; we are not called to be hard towards each other, but to show mercy, and to do so cheerfully.

So, let's put all of this into action. A sacrificial call from the one who sacrificed everything. A recognition of our inter-dependence in the church. An acknowledgement that God in his grace has bestowed his gifts upon us. And a determination that we will use those gifts to build up the Lord's people, teach his word and proclaim his gospel.