

2-8-2015

In 1969 I moved from Sunderland to be curate in the parish of St Alphege, Solihull. My particular responsibility was to be priest-in-charge of St Michael's church in Sharmans Cross Road. A fortnight ago, I returned there to preach for the first time since I left in 1971.

What made St Michael's special was that the congregation met in a school. The church had only been in existence for a year or two and I was their first proper priest-in-charge. It was a very stimulating and encouraging time. The congregation was made up of lots of young families and was growing very fast. Each Sunday we used to arrange the layout in the school Hall, with the Altar in the centre of one long wall, and the chairs in several rows in an arc around it. Throughout the week, everything we did happened in one another's homes. Things have moved on a bit in the last few decades, but at the school the worship and the atmosphere was much as I remember.

St Michael's came into my mind as I read the passage from the letter to the Ephesians that we heard this-morning. In the New Testament, 'Church' never refers to a building. For the first Christians, "church" always means the Christian community assembled together. At St Michael's, as I reminded them a fortnight ago, we used to glory in our situation because we couldn't escape the fact that the Church is us. Church buildings can be wonderful gifts and speak to us of God's presence in all sorts of ways, but they can also get in the way. We can find ourselves so caught up in maintaining the building that we forget the deep and profound truth that the Body of Christ is not a building at all, but people. It is we who are the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Bride of Christ, and the Pilgrim People of God. When we begin to think this way, we are brought back to God's gift of himself to us, and his gift of us to one another.

It's all there in that wonderful passage we read this-morning from the letter to the Ephesians. So let's take a look at what St Paul is actually saying:

We are called, and are charged to live lives worthy of our calling. Before ever you turned towards God, he was reaching out to you. Everything that you have done in

becoming a Christian has, in fact, been a response to his call. Perhaps it hasn't felt like that. Maybe you think you are opting for God in choosing to believe, choosing to trust. Well, in fact it's the other way round. Our turning to God is rather like the way a sunflower turns towards the sun. It's the sun who enlightens and warms and encourages it to grow and flower. The flower responds to the gift that the sun provides. It's the same with us. We turn towards God who is our sun. Our lives of discipleship are our response to the warmth of his loving call.

It helps to remember that it's this way round. Once we remember that we have been called before we ever responded, we won't fall into the trap of imagining that faith is something that we possess. First and foremost faith is a response, something that we enter into and make our own throughout our lives, learning to trust as God trusts us, learning to forgive as he forgives us, learning to love as he loves us. In our passage this-morning Paul spells it out: "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".

Paul goes on to talk about the gifts that God gives. Having called us, he equips us. He provides us with the necessary gifts to fulfil our particular vocation. Unless we are careful, in our world today our lives can become dominated by the pressure to earn things, deserve things, acquire things, achieve things. But when you stop for a moment and consider what matters most to you, you will realize that the really important things haven't been things you've laboured to achieve. In fact they are things that you experience like a present, unearned, undeserved, and absolutely free. Think of your parents, your husband, your wife, your children, your friends. When you stop and think, you did not choose or deserve or earn these people in your life. They do not exist in the world of earning, deserving and achieving. They were given to you willy-nilly. And the greatest miracle of all is that the One who gives these free and undeserved gifts to you, freely gives you Himself. He is the greatest gift of all, the supreme Giver, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who loves us so much that he fills us with his life and has made us for one another and for eternity.

“You did not choose me; I chose you to go and bear fruit.” He gives himself to us, and gives each of us our special gifts of talent and personality so that we can go and bear fruit. Paul puts this beautifully. “The gifts he gave were for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ”. In other words our gifts are not to be buried or hoarded. They are to be used creatively and productively for the sake of others so that they may be helped to grow. We are called to maturity, which is about becoming as fully ourselves, as fully Christ-like, as may be.

We are living at a time when our instincts are almost exclusively individualistic. We tend to value individual rights. We tend to see one another as clients or customers. We place great emphasis upon our ability to make choices. Personal networking is all-consuming. But the New Testament, and Paul in particular, see things differently, and encourage us to find our personal identity and purpose, not in personal aggrandisement and self-promotion, but in relationship with one another and through the contribution we are making to the common good. Our growth in maturity is measured by the extent our gifts are being used for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. The fact is that these days this vision is profoundly counter-cultural, but nevertheless it is what St Paul is telling us. The various limbs and organs of a body have no independent existence. They only fulfil their function within the whole. So our gifts are not individual possessions, but are to be used as an expression of the common good. In St Paul’s words, true maturity comes as we “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love”.

It’s a beautiful image. But it contains a profound truth. We do not just receive gifts from God. We are ourselves a gift of God to one another. We are given to one another in community. There’s a lovely phrase earlier in today’s passage which talks of “bearing with one another in love”. We aren’t called necessarily to like one another. Liking one another is not really the point. We are called to love one another, and to bear with one another. Life in the Spirit is a kind of school where we learn to forgive one another, to be patient with one another, to be humble enough to let others

take the limelight, to be prepared to be kind and generous while hiding our own light under a bushel. And so on. All about leading a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. It's down-to-earth, unglamorous stuff, but it's a necessary part of serving one another in the Body of Christ, and learning to be fruitful.

It's not rocket-science, but it is what life in the Spirit is all about. Recognizing that we are responding to One who is always giving to us. Learning to give in response, in our turn. Cherishing one another. Being a gift to one another. Building one another up in love. And together serving the work of the Kingdom. And at the heart one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.