

Different Gifts

Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8

At the Book Festival last week I heard Ian Goldin, an Oxford professor of globalisation, and Tommy Lee-Devlin, a writer at *The Economist*, talk about their new book, *Age of the City, Why Our Future will be Won or Lost Together*. I listened to their clear-eyed and timely analysis of the challenges and opportunities that comes from life in the city. They argued that cities are engines of cooperation, which fundamentally enable us to become more human. "Cities are deeply isolating for too many people. Nevertheless, the potential for the modern city to be a force for cohesion is immense...(There should be) a new, more positive view of the potential for large cities to help build the connective tissue of modern society...The real magic of the city then comes from its ability to knit (individuals and groups) together into a connected whole, through the power of the serendipitous encounters and shared experiences that only a city can create."ⁱ "...cities throughout history have been the great incubators of human progress through their power to bring us closer together, something we need now more than ever."ⁱⁱ

As I listened to what was being said, so much of what we do as a Church, the bringing together, the creation of a place of welcome and understanding, a place where skills and talents and gifts can be brought together for the benefit of the greater good and not just the individual, resonated in my ears. We've been doing this, or trying to do this, for years. Churches create faithful community inspired by a love of God, and a love of our neighbours as ourselves.

In a secular world, where people struggle with the 'God-thing', a realisation of what Churches can do and be can be surprising to those whose notion of what we are is based back in the 1930s.

The Church is about helping people realise and use their different gifts as part of the body of Christ. It's astonishing how often the apostle Paul uses 'body' imagery in his letters, as he does in our New Testament reading today. Bodies are to be presented as a "living sacrifice", a no-holds-barred commitment to doing good, and helping others, and bringing people together. To listening as well as doing. Living a good life comes at a cost. Using our gifts nearly always costs us as we give something of ourselves. But what a blessing and a reward we often get in return. Paul is writing about a, "practical theology that details ways and means for practising committed love in Church and City.

We all have gifts from God. Not the same gifts but different ones. Some may be ordinary, some may be extraordinary – and we are called to use them not for ourselves but for others. The family of faith may be one body, but it has many different parts. We have a need for one another. It is good to remember that. Different gifts in different people. I've said this so many times but each time I see someone come into church through those doors, I wonder, "what gift has God given that person that God thinks we need in the life of this Church?"

What gift do you think God has given you that we need here? "Who me? Oh, I'm just ordinary, nothing special about me, quite the opposite." But that is not, I can assure you, how God sees you. The baker and jam maker; the finance person and the musician; the person good with children, and the person good with older people; the person who gets things done, and the person who knows that sometimes things take time to fall into place and need nurturing. The person who asks the awkward question that everyone is thinking but no-one is saying; and the person who has absolutely the right answer at the right moment. The person with the prophetic gift to say how things really are; and the person who can sit, and listen, and place things together to give a fuller picture. The person who is good with their hands; and the person who can shape things with

words. The teacher; the one who cares for the hurting; the one whose presence and words gives enormous encouragement; the generous soul who uses their money, time or talent unstintingly; the one who leads the way ahead; the one who has compassion and lifts the spirits of the downcast.

This is what we as a community of faith offer, and do offer our city, and the wider Church. This is what we are doing every week through groups and organisations, and worship. The Wednesday Club, Morningside Hope, the Coffee Morning, the Sunday Club and Creche, those who make music and arrange flowers, those who clean this building and see to its maintenance, those who put together orders of service and magazine, those who review their financial giving to give a little more to the work of the church, those who are in the kitchen today, those who've baked and made for the stall in the St Matthew Hall, and those who will buy from it. This is the living rock of faith that Isaiah talked about in the Old Testament. This is the stuff of which we are made. This is our heritage and our faith DNA, this is the 'joy and gladness (that) will be found...'; this is the thanksgiving that makes us want to sing.

Not that we sit back on laurels. Not that we don't recognise that there is much still to be done. Not that we shouldn't be realistic about what we can and cannot do. But we understand, through faith, that together, and with God, we are doing much, and when others join us there may be more that we might attempt. Using our different gifts to help where we can.

One of the things that saddens me, well actually it annoys me, is when the work of faith through the Church and through other faith families, is downplayed or ignored or attacked by organisations like the National Secular Society. The ridiculing of faith and the faith family, and sometimes the attacks that are made are hard to bear. We don't claim perfection, nor do we claim

we're the only good people in the world doing good things. My goodness we have our flaws and our failings. But we also have our triumphs and our delights.

It also saddens me to see the Church diminish when it is often precisely the things we offer that can help the world and are not being taken up, or engaged with, or realised. Supporting the lonely and socially isolated, the vulnerable and the passed over is something faith communities have been doing for generations. Churches don't have all the answers, but we have some. We're one of the few inter-generational organisations that survives, finding a place for young and old and those in between. Recognising that all are part of the wider body, and that when each one is welcomed, they will bring not only their needs, but also their gifts. Using its gifts and playing its part, the Church often seems like one of our country's best kept secrets.

It is beyond wearying to be given the impression that parts of our country, in civic and voluntary worlds, find it difficult to work with us because *they*'don't do God.' It's not simply about 'doing God'. It's about 'doing humanity. The Church is happy enough to do God, but for goodness sake, take us seriously when we ask to work in partnership in our nation and community and offer to play our part in helping the vulnerable, the forgotten and the poor of our land. We don't demand participation from a place of privilege; we demand to share in the privilege of serving others alongside national and local government and other charities, and individuals, and not be excluded because faith is part of our profile.ⁱⁱⁱ The Church can be a model of what it looks like when different gifts are used, and the whole body is blessed by working together.

Martin Luther King Jr set out to transform the soul and laws of the United States in relation to racial discrimination. He knew that people needed to work together and use their gifts to make a difference:

“Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of (people) willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”^{iv}

We are called to be the body of Christ here in Morningside. We are called to use our wide variety of God-given gifts in our homes and workplaces, in the city where we live and here in Church because that great truth, we’re better together, still holds. We all have a role to play. Change starts with our own behaviour. The Church, the family of faith, has an unbounded creative and compassionate potential to provide a source of hope for the future. By working together to improve our Church, we can create a better life for all.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Ian Goldin and Tommy Lee-Devlin, *Age of the City*, p105

ⁱⁱ *Ibid* px111

ⁱⁱⁱ Derek Browning, *Speech, General Assembly May 2018*

^{iv} Martin Luther King Jr, *Why We Can’t Wait*, p74