

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 1 August 2021

Gracious God, thank you for opening our hearts and minds to the gift of your word, the bread of heaven. Help us hunger for your peace and righteousness over the things of this world. Amen.

Ephesians 4:1-16

Gifts that each of us has in Christ

Yesterday, we had a memorial service for Joan Pollock. People shared their stories about her. Some of them were about flowers, friendship, community work and fundraising. Indeed, she had so many gifts, and she used them not only for her and her family but for others. The atmosphere was bright and happy, and the afternoon tea was full of joy with abundant stories. It was good to see that someone's gift could have served in many such ways. Gifts in Christ are a theme for today. When God called us to be the family of God, gifts were also given to us so that we will live a life worthy of the calling. These diverse gifts that we have worked together in unity. It helps us grow into maturity in Christ.

Calling entails gifts in Christ

Those who are in Christ are called by God. It is what we read in Ephesians. The category of 'calling' concerns not only those who are ordained but the recipients of this letter as a whole. Ephesians 4:2-6 tells us to be faithful to the common vocation and to behave appropriately to that vocation. Christian vocation is living the life of 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. Here the gifts given by Christ seem to be identified with various leaders, whose job is to train all the saints. But what about those who are not in the leadership? 1 Corinthians, which was written before Ephesians, the apostle Paul talks about the 'gifts of the Spirit.' It reads, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."¹ Here Paul talks about gifts that any believer may possess and use for the good of the body. We can see that the whole church shares equally in the gifts of God.

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

There is an African proverb that says – "It takes a village to raise a child.' That is, an entire community of people must provide for and interact positively with children for those children to experience and grow in a safe and healthy environment. The same goes for leaders. In church, we still have leaders to whom special tasks are assigned. But leaders cannot be leaders without the support of the faith community. Leaders are made, sustained by the whole church community with prayers, support, and encouragement. In addition, good leaders are necessary for the church's unity. The gifts which are equally given to us is always working for the growth of the body in the unity of Christ.

Gifts in unity

In Ephesians, it is emphasized that every effort should be expended toward Christian unity. Using gifts that we received is no exception. In the unity of the Spirit,² gifts are used to equip people for ministry. It will lead us to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. The sevenfold use of the word 'one' (4:4-6), e.g. one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith etc., informs that the church's unity culminates in the oneness of God.

But unity is not the same as uniformity. In Ephesians, the mystery of God is revealed in Christ and results in the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles. Yet, it does not erase the distinctions between these different groups. Instead, the church becomes to know 'the wisdom of God in its rich variety.'³ Part of the call is to tolerance or bearing with one another. Even with the persistence of differences, the church may nevertheless grow together as a body. The point here is that the emphasis is not the diversity of gifts but the fact that all believers share them. In v13, Paul says that we will build 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." The 'all' in this verse, in its original context, would have meant Jews and Gentiles. But in our world today, it would mean all believers.

The church is supposed to reflect this unity. However, the perfection of the church is a process and not a completed event. Christ is already "mature." Yet the church, which is Christ's body, must build up the body until it arrives at the stature of Christ. Christ has equipped the church with gifts⁴ so that the church as Christ's body may reach maturity. In this way, we reach unity

² Ephesians 4:3

³ Ephesians 3:10

⁴ Ephesians 4:7, 11

which is a goal of the church's ministry and as a barometer of Christian maturity. Those who are joined together by the church's ministry grow into the unity of the faith. They grow up in every way.⁵ Disunity signals the spiritual immaturity of those who constitute the church.

Gifts in unity grow into maturity in Christ

In our storytime, we heard one of Aesop's fables, titled *The Lion and the Mouse*. The moral of the story is that mercy brings its reward and that there is no being so small that it cannot help a greater one. Later English versions, which I've read, reinforce it by having the mouse promise to return the lion's favour to its sceptical amusement. The moral serves what a perspective of the world when it comes to a relationship between two individuals in which 'give and take' is a norm. But from a biblical perspective, it may be different.

The questions are broad to answer. But we may answer the first question is that each person has a gift from God. To the second question, we can't answer it really because the word 'special' depends on definitions. In this story, the mouse's gift – gnawing, which seems useless turned out to be special indeed! Next, we can also see the element of unity in Christ to work towards eternal life. The mouse used her gift diligently until freeing the lion from the net. The lion and the mouse was a team! Although she was small, one by one, the mouse gnawed one strand and another to cut the net. She didn't give up but succeeded. Last, we also see maturity in Christ because the lion and the mouse became friends. The past hostility is gone, peace obtained.

Gifts in Christ makes us fulfil our vocation as Christians. It removes any barriers or obstacles among us. It also works actively in the world as it operates in a different dimension. It opens room to invite others to join this journey. Just as God is active in every corner of creation, God uses God's people to make sure people are fed, clothed, comforted, educated, protected. Gifts, unity and maturity in Christ go hand in hand. May God help us live by it today and always. Amen.

⁵ Verse 15