

# Second Sunday of Epiphany - 19 January 2025

## Message – Growing our gifts

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Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of New Life, help us to see with your eyes, and to embrace your gifts. **Amen.**

Well, let's get straight to the difficult bit; working out how we apply today's gospel reading to our lives. The passage is found only in John's gospel. John's description of the start of Jesus' ministry is a little different from the synoptics'. His start appears gradual and almost accidental.

As John the Baptist, not the gospel writer, baptised Jesus, he recognised Jesus as the Messiah and, despite Jesus not having officially started his ministry, according to chapter one of John he had already acquired five disciples. Not bad for someone who has not started their ministry.

We then have the account of what seems a somewhat reluctantly performed miracle, which John describes as the first of Jesus's signs. Very few people seem to notice this sign but it assures the first disciples that God really is working through Jesus and strengthens their faith.

In two chapter's time John will say that a healing was the second sign. One might expect a further enumeration of signs but there is none, which has given a great opportunity to scholars to argue over how many signs there are, whether there was a signs source, and which are the signs that were included in it. There is no textual evidence for any of this but that is the joy of Biblical studies. We are more often than we would like left wondering.

Jesus' apparent reluctance to perform the first sign is another point which scholars wrestle with. There is again no agreement. However, if we take the humanity of Jesus seriously, becoming aware of the nature and timing of his calling was most likely gradual.

Many of us will have had the experience of being asked to do something and initially saying no, and not always as politely as Jesus. The address 'woman' would have been a normal formal address to one's mother. It is the same word Jesus uses to her from the cross, *'Woman, here is your son.'* Then he said to the disciple, *'Here is your mother.'* (John 19:26b-27a)

Jesus response at the wedding is perhaps, like many of us, our first response. Given that Jesus has already started acquiring disciples, it is not unreasonable to imagine that his next thought might have been, 'Hmm, when would be the time? Everything does seem to be starting to point in that direction. God has spoken from heaven, I've had a little sojourn in the desert, and I seem to be acquiring disciples without really trying. Lord, I am not sure I am ready but I know you are with me.'

Of course, we do not know what made Jesus change his mind but his first response was not his last response and so a quiet and symbolic miracle, a sign, took place.

John's gospel lacks an institution of the Lord's Supper, instead we have the washing of the disciples' feet. But, in today's reading we have the image of the wine of the new kingdom replacing the rituals of the old covenant right at the start of Jesus' public ministry.

And the sharing of bread also finds its way into John's gospel in the form of the feeding of the five thousand (*Matt 14:13–21; Mark 6:31–44; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–14*), the only miracle other than the resurrection to occur in all four gospels. The sharing of bread and wine find their way into John's gospel in a subtle and symbolic way.

Jesus experienced fully what it was to be human. It is not unreasonable to think that he might have recognised his calling just as we sometimes do through other people recognising gifts and talents in us. We all need the humility to recognise that others' perceptions may be quite accurate, even, perhaps especially, when they do not agree with ours. We at the very least need to take what they are saying seriously and reflect on why they are saying it.

There may be factors that they are not aware of that mean that something is not the role for us. Nonetheless, our starting point should not be that we cannot do a thing but rather to explore what would be required in order for us to do it. Remember, we are called to be the body of Christ, working together and supporting one another.

Our epistle reading is pointing to our calling as the way in which we can apply today's gospel in our lives. Each of us is to be a sign to the world of the Love and Glory of God. We are back to our baptismal promises of last week.

The church of Corinth had an assumption that being spiritual meant having a high status in the church. St Paul wrote to them to tell them that it would be hard for them to have been more wrong.

He started pointing this out way back in chapters two and

three (2:6-16, 3:1-4). And now he redefines for them what it means to be spiritual. Being spiritual is having what comes from the Spirit (12:1). And Paul gives a first indication of how we might know whether something someone claims is spiritual is. If our lives do not declare that Jesus is Lord, we cannot be considered spiritual.

What that will look like may look very different for different people but if an action is not loving we can safely say that it is not of God, it does not proclaim the love of Christ.

Paul's contrast is another bit of Greek that gets scholars excited. For us, we can see that it is intended as an opposite but Paul was unlikely to introduce something that didn't have meaning to his readers.

In the last few decades over twenty ancient curse tablets have been found in and around Corinth. It was a custom to ask your god to curse your competitors. A possible reading of the Greek is '*Jesus grant a curse*'. Paul may be naming this as the contrasting behaviour. A behaviour considered perfectly spiritual in their old, pagan, lives, but certainly not an expression of the love of God for all people.

Having redefined what it means to be spiritual, Paul goes on to define the gifts of the spirit using a different word from the one the Corinthians had been using. Paul calls these spiritual gifts *charisma*, the word for gift. Paul emphasises that we do not earn or chose them and that they are all given as ways of serving. Perhaps John's church had similar problems which was why he included the foot washing at the last supper.

God gives to each of us particular gifts. It is the same spirit

that gives them, they are all from God, all are required for the body of Christ. Paul emphasises the coherence of the gifts and God's design of unity-in-diversity. There is no place for rivalry or competition. Well unless it is in outdoing one another in love as he suggests to the Romans (*Rom 12:10*).

As a community, we are a work in progress. We are called to be a safe space in which each of us can explore our gifts, our talents, and our calling. We need time, space, and opportunity to practice, to learn and to discover. And, this need continues throughout life.

When we lay down one chapter of life and start another, we are often called to new things. We are called to be a community that encourages and builds up one another, ready to support one another in the challenges and transitions we face. For some in this community their very ministry may be to be an encourager or a wise elder who has navigated much of this way before.

As we continue to workout our baptismal promises, we remember that Jesus was the light that came into the world and that we are now that light for others.

We do not always know how our lives have touched other's lives but if we act out of love, the sign of God's Love and Glory may be seen in us and may encourage others, just as Jesus' first sign encouraged his first disciples.

Our signs are unlikely to be on the scale of Jesus's but the impact of our acts of love, though sometime seeming so simple to us, may be far more profound than we ever imagined.