

A Variety of Gifts

There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord; working in all sorts of different ways in different people, it is the same God who is working in all of them. The way in which the Spirit is given to each person is for a good purpose.

I was watching a programme on TV this afternoon over a late sandwich lunch. It was about how different children see the world. There was one little boy very philosophically struggling with a disability, acknowledging his limits and accepting that, because of his condition, there were certain things that were hard for him and other things he just couldn't do. He didn't like not being able to do the things other children of his age enjoyed, but he had friends who were clearly fond of him and made very effort to include him. He had a wisdom way beyond his nine years, and he accepted his lot and was very realistic about needing to rest and use a wheelchair. 'Life is what it is and I'll take it as it comes', seemed to be his philosophy and he was content to achieve what he could within his limits. There was no sense of wallowing in self pity or wailing 'woe is me' which might have been understandable in a child, but he had a maturity of a person four times his age and was able to articulate his feelings matter-of-factly and without regret.

By contrast, there was a girl of a similar age in the group who hated to fail and it was quite clear that this attitude had been instilled in her from an early age by ambitious parents who would not accept second best from her and were pushing her to fit their own aspirations and high expectations. Consequently, she was eager to please and looked for approval in everything, living in a state of anxiety about whether whatever she did was good enough for her exacting parents. They took her away from her school and her friends and moved house so as to be nearer the top girl's school they wanted her to attend. Her mother made it quite clear that her friendships were not as important as the opportunities her parents were making sacrifices to give her.

I very much warmed to the little boy and felt deeply sorry for the little girl. The first had learned that he was loved and accepted just as he was. That those who cared about him didn't see his disability only the infinitely precious human being he was. The little girl, however, in spite of being infinitely precious too, had learned she could only be loved and accepted if she met certain targets and ideals her parents set and they were always moving the bar higher, almost setting her up to fail. Unlike the boy, she had not learned that she was intrinsically lovable; she could only get her parents love and approval on condition that she achieved. She was subjected to a kind of emotional prostitution, having to buy affection.

Today, as we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, we celebrate also the fact that God loves us and has given all of us gifts through the Grace of the Holy Spirit. But the greatest

of gifts he has given us are his life and his love. God alone loves us unconditionally for who we are. We are his creation, the treasured and cherished work of his hands. We do not need to achieve to please him, just to be and become the people he has created us to be. While he has bestowed certain charisms upon certain people - some he has called to be prophets, some apostles, some teachers, and so on - and the Called and Gifted process has enabled many people in our diocese to discover that they have spiritual gifts they never knew they had. At the same time he has gifted all of us with life and an openness to his Spirit in nature, in beauty, in the kindness of strangers, in the love of others, the acceptance of friends, an experience of the spiritual that can lift us up to another plain of pleasure and fulfilment and an encounter with the God who loves us with no strings attached.

Today is a time to give thanks for the gifts God has given us, simple gifts, gifts we perhaps take for granted. I have just returned from a retreat which was a great spiritual uplift for me. One day my director told me to be thankful for what God had given me and she told me, quite simply, to be grateful for the five senses through which God communicates so much of his love to us. She told me to go out for a walk in the grounds and into the surrounding countryside and to note how my five sense gave me an awareness of God's presence in things which moved me and gave me pleasure. I will share some of those with you and then, if you would like, there are pencils and pieces of paper on the pews, and I would encourage you to write down just one or two ways in which you believe you might experience the presence of God through your senses. We will collect the papers and offer them in thanksgiving to God at the offertory.

SEEING

- The sight of the sun setting over the sea, blazing reds and oranges.
- The sight of a lamb nudging its mother for milk.
- The sight of a pair of buzzards soaring high in the sky.
- The sight of the early morning mist filling the valley.
- The sight of a toddler examining a fallen pheasant feather.
- The intricate geometry of a downy dandelion seed head.

TOUCHING

- The springy softness of moss underfoot.
- The silky fur of a cat I stroked.
- The warm moist breath of a curious cow leaning over a field gate.
- The different texture of leaves: prickly, veined, furry, waxy, spiky, parchment-like.
- The flaky bark of a silver birch tree.
- The vicious, unexpected sting of a nettle as I brush past on a walk.

TASTING

- The salty, seaweed tang of the air as I walk on the beach at Rhyl.
- The bitter, distinctive flavour of a wild garlic leaf.
- The different savours of mint growing in the herb garden.

- The unfamiliar freshness of green tea.
- The intense bitterness of a paracetamol tablet on the tongue.
- The thick, velvety caress of homemade broccoli and stilton soup.

SMELLING

- The delicious aroma of bacon grilling.
- The intense perfume of lavender leaves crushed between the fingers.
- The pure cool, fragrance of the early morning air.
- The rich summery smell of new mown grass evoking lazy summers watching cricket on the green.
- The intoxicating perfume of coffee roasting.
- The fresh linen fragrance of washing drying on the line.

HEARING

- The intense, thick, presence-filled silence of the chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is perpetually exposed.
- The juicy, squelchy, comforting sound of a cow chewing the cud.
- The dozy, calming buzz of bees collecting pollen from the blossom.
- The fluid trill of a blackbird.
- The excited yelp of a dog urging its master to throw a stick.
- The distant chiming of a church bell ringing the half-hour way down in the valley.

Spend a moment two thinking of what brings delight to your senses, write it down and offer it up as a prayer to God for all that he has gifted to you. As St Paul says today, ‘the way in which the Spirit is given to each person is for a good purpose’.