

What says The Spirit?

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Acts 2.1-21; Psalm 104.26-36; 1 Cor 12.1-13; John 20.19-23

Nam eloquentiam quae admirationem non habet nullam iudico. Pentecost seems a suitable occasion for a little speaking in tongues! It's a statement by Roman politician and orator, Cicero, that means: "Eloquence that does not startle I consider not to be eloquence."

Were you a little startled when I began by speaking, no doubt badly, in Latin? The people waiting in the upper room on the day of Pentecost were surely a little surprised to see the tongues of fire and to hear each other speaking in many differing languages.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the unexpected, the Spirit of freedom, the Spirit of the unanticipated. If we are not sometimes a little startled, a little surprised or disturbed by what happens in church and in our parish life, perhaps we might ask ourselves, "Where is the Spirit?"

The disciples were not drunk, nor were they out of control. Though the Spirit was bringing something new and startling, the Spirit did not bring disorder or loss of control. There was no cause for fear; quite the opposite, in fact. The coming of the Spirit gave the disciples of Jesus new boldness, new courage, and new ability to fulfil the mission that Jesus had given them.

Jesus had told them to wait until they received power from above. This was not power in the sense of domination, force or political power. Rather, it meant ability. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples received ability to speak in many languages. Peter found new ability to preach boldly and clearly. The disciples received renewed ability to heal the sick.

Every Christian is a charismatic, a person with a gift, for that's what charismatic means. There is no un-gifted life, no life of total dis-ability. Everyone is of great value. All have their own special charism, or gift, in the community of Christ's people.

The Holy Spirit and the power of God is given to all believers. Our baptismal calling puts our lives at service of the kingdom, including whatever gifts—abilities—we have and whatever gifts we may receive. Yet there are many differing abilities, gifts, charisms, given to and exercised by each person individually.

The letter to the Corinthians encourages us not to be ignorant concerning spiritual matters. Yet perhaps we do not live out our gifts as fully as we might. The place to start is wherever we are aware of God's presence in our lives with *who* we are, *what* we are and *how* we are.

Not only special religious experiences are so-called 'charismatic'. The *whole* of life, and *every* life in faith is God's gift, for the Spirit is 'poured out upon all flesh' to quicken it, to give life.

Our individual abilities and energies become charisms—gifts enabled by God—in the *relationships* which form our shared life. It is often in our relationships that we discover God's gifts for the first time.

Yet the Holy Spirit does give new gifts to believers. We may find the Spirit encouraging us to exercise God-given abilities that are new, that we did not have before. These include especially gifts that build up the community of Christ's people, as witnesses to the coming kingdom. Besides the nine gifts we heard described in the reading from I Corinthians 12, there are many gifts of ministry, service and leadership.

Paul needed to emphasize the use of spiritual gifts to build up the church. He taught unity but not uniformity:

“there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, varieties of services, but the same Lord, 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.”

It's not agreed doctrine or submission to authority that creates unity and harmony. Restriction and uniformity in ideas, words and action makes the community numb and boring.

The power that unites us as differing people with many differing gifts is *love in the fellowship of the Spirit*. Today, however, we need to emphasise unity's complimentary principle, that it is *freedom* that releases the different gifts. The power of unity is love. But the power of diversity is freedom. “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Cor. 3.17)

The Spirit is spontaneous and free. Our regular church services display a wealth of ideas and reflections in prayer, preaching and music. In this, they certainly make a place for some God-given gifts. Yet we do limit severely our forms of expression, and we offer little opportunity for spontaneity. Perhaps too often we ask “what does the rule book say?” instead of “what says the Spirit?”

We have become disciplined and disciplinary assemblies for talking and listening. Yet, we need also the opportunity and willingness to express freely our experience of the things of God, to employ gifts that God has given us, personally and individually.

Yes, the Holy Spirit works in the church, but the Spirit does this by guiding, inspiring and giving abilities to individuals—in fact to all of us. The speaking in tongues experienced by the disciples was a *personal* ability, made possible by the Spirit. Paul said he desired that all, each one personally might be able to pray in this way, to experience this particular ability from the Spirit.

He went on to urge the Corinthians (I Cor. 14. 1) to ‘earnestly desire’ the best gifts and especially ‘that all may prophesy’—which includes personal, everyday witness in sharing the faith in ways that build up, encourage and comfort.

The only way to find out whether one has a gift of healing is to pray for the sick. The only way to speak in tongues is to open one's mouth. The only way to be a witness to the faith is to start doing something, personally, in action or words. We need to ‘have a go’ when we feel prompted to exercise any gift.

Of course we need to be wise and discreet, but if we are over-cautious, because we are afraid of mistakes, embarrassment or failure, we won't understand our potential or live in all the opportunities God offers us. If we don't ‘have a go’ we won't learn our genuine limitations either, and be at peace with them.

To exercise an ability from God is often something we learn. Of course we make mistakes and encounter defeats, but we also receive the ability to continue learning. The person who believes is a person full of possibilities. Let's not limit ourselves to the roles laid down for us by others. And let's not tie other people down to our preconceptions of them.

The potential of our gifts is awakened by trust: trust in God, trust in ourselves and each other. Here are some suggestions as to how we might put such trust into practice at St. Philip's.

First, let's continue to encourage another in sharing our faith and the use of God's gifts to minister to each other and those around us. Small groups are an excellent opportunity for this. Besides the home groups (of which I hope there can be more) any collection of people in the

Parish can grow in abilities given by the Spirit and the sharing of our lives. Nothing in the church is exempt from the experience of God's power by the Spirit. Why not simply gather together a few people for morning tea or supper regularly to pray and share good things from God?

Second: let's give leaders in ministry as much room to move—as much freedom—as the Spirit would give them. I don't expect Rob would want to swing from the rafters, but when he seeks to do something different or new, spontaneously or with careful planning, we should applaud and give thanks, not bring out the rule book. And the same should apply to others working in any capacity in the parish who seek to do new things.

Third, let's be both spontaneous and persistent. If God is prompting us to do something, the best time may be often at once but, as well, we may find that we need to stick with something for quite a while before it matures and becomes strong.

Fourth: "seek earnestly the best gifts", as Paul says. It is a proper and good thing to seek an ability or gifting from the Holy Spirit.

Lastly (for the moment): a ministry and gift that I believe we should think and pray about here at St. Philip's is healing. In the gospels the disciples were commanded to heal the sick. They healed the sick in the name of Jesus directly after the day of Pentecost. The healing of the sick in body and mind is a completely natural part of Christian life and experience and an essential part of the church's ministry.

May the Holy Spirit grant gifts of ability and power, to build us up in the church, to bless those in need, and to share with all the good news of Jesus Christ.