

SUNDAY SERMON

SUNDAY 14th AUGUST 2022

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EPHESIANS 2

And in him you are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit (Eph.2:22)

Trying to sell your house must be one of the most frustrating experiences of life-unless, like my daughter recently, who sold the first day for the price requested.

I didn't have that privilege. The frustrating thing for me was that when viewers came, they enthused over everything and assured me that a bid was on its way. Rarely did you hear another word. No house is perfect, and I recognize that was true of mine. But most people want everything on their list and the truth is, that they are most unlikely to find this house of their dreams. You feel like saying to them, 'It sounds a dream, what you are looking for. The only way you are going to get your dreams realised is to buy a piece of land and self-build. Then and only then will you get what you are searching for... Self build.

Now God is in the business of self-build. It is there in our reading from Ephesians. And possibly, you are part of the build here at St George. I recall watching a man in the Cotswold building a dry wall. Beside him was a pile of Cotswold stone of all shapes and sizes. Much easier, I thought, to build a brick wall. At least all the bricks are uniform shape, size and colour. You'd get the job done much more quickly. However, are you going to get stones of different sizes and shapes into a solid and durable wall. But wonder of wonders, he did. He chose just the right stone for the right place, knocked off some of the rough edges and fitted that stone in the right place at the right time for the right purpose. And the wall was completed for the purpose for which it was planned.

And in him you are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit (Eph.2:22)

A dwelling in which God lives by his spirit? It was that last phrase which grabbed me. What kind of dwelling is that?

What is the kind of people, living stones in whom God can live by **his spirit**? What kind of fellowship is it that when strangers come amongst us, they leave, saying, God is in their midst, manifesting Himself through his spirit?' Let's unpack this verse, compare scripture with scripture and seek an answer to this all-important question. You might vbe surprised at what is not included that might automatically be at the top of our list.

1. **A body of people characterized by Christian love.**

Romans 5 is one of the big THEREFORE chapters in this epistle. Paul has shown how those who stand condemned before God can be acquitted by taking for themselves the spotless righteous robe of Jesus Christ. He now lists some of the consequences of this gracious act of God and in v 5 he writes:

God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.' God's Holy Spirit is the one through whom God has poured out his love into our hearts. THE WORD SPEAKS OF LAVISHNESS.

Imagine you are watching your favorite sports program on TV. Just as you are about to pour yourself a cup of tea, you realise the match has reached a critical point. Play is riveting. You cannot take your eyes off the action. You did have one eye on your cup and the other on TV. Such is the excitement, however, that now both eyes are on the TV.

The tea is still being poured but you attention is elsewhere. The tea reaches the brim of the cup, overflows into the saucer, fills the saucer and overflows onto the table. It is only when you feel it on your legs that you realise what has been happening,

Now take that image and the word poured out in Rom.5.5 and you have a picture of the overflowing love the Holy Spirit has poured into our hearts. It's too much for one person to contain. It has to fill our hearts and then overflow until it reaches others. So those coming amongst us will feel as those around the early Christians felt which led them to exclaim, How these Christians love each other!

Paul expands this teaching in chapter twelve and, of course, 1 Cor.13.

The church is body of people for whom;

- **Love is sincere.** People are not two faced with others- donning a mask of love when with certain people; ripping it off when away from them and by their comments and actions reveal indifference, criticism, or even contempt and hatred.
- **Love will want the very best for each other.** Sometimes this will necessitate confronting another re. a particular sin, an ill-advised relationship, a non-Christlike spirit towards another, but not, as 1 Cor. Reminds, almost gloating in the failure of another but in true love and the prayer for repentance and forgiveness, recognising as speaking and receiving the truth in love while mindful of their own weakness and powerless in the face of temptation
- **Love will not be seeking to extol themselves over others,** wont be serving to impress and go up in the recognised ranks within the body, won't be putting others down in attempts to put themselves up but honouring one another above themselves.
- **Love will be aware of the needs of each other** rather than being consumed by their own small world. They will recognise the lonely who would value a cuppa and conversation, the financially needy and seek as a fellowship to help alleviate those needs; the struggler who needs support; the bereaved who are finding hard to refocus their lives following the death of their spouse-one of similar but earlier experience coming alongside and helping them through.
- **Love will rejoice with those who are rejoicing over the good things in their life;** they will weep with those who are weeping because of the bad things in their lives.
- **And so the chapter goes on** but the upshot is that each of these reflections of divine reminds me of how utterly different such love is from that residing in the heart of most of us. It is only supernatural love, driven by a supernatural spirit, focused on a supernatural sacrifice for

our sins that can make such love a possibility. It is a sign that God is amongst us living by his spirit.

- **It is at the very root of unity, of holiness, of service. Of genuine Christian fellowship and a sign that God dwells amongst us by his Spirit.**

2. A body of people characterised by service

When we come to chapter four of this epistle we move from belief to behaviour, from creed to conduct. We are reminded how our Christian beliefs have to be worked out in our everyday lives.- a life worthy of the calling which we have received, to quote Paul.

After reminding his readers of all they have in common, he goes on to point out all that makes for diversity within the unity of the fellowship. Unity and diversity are not contradictions or mutually exclusive here. Indeed, the diversity contributes to the unity and vice versa. It is at this stage that Paul introduces a quotation from the psalms.

‘When he ascended on high

He led captives in his train

And gave gifts to men

‘The image is of a king returning victorious from war. To the acclaim of the crowds, he heads the procession up the slopes to his capital city of Jerusalem. Behind the king in chains are those whom he has taken captive in battle. Once in Jerusalem, the king sits upon his throne and receives those whom he has conquered. One by one the wealthier members of the vanquished society kneel before the king and offer him gifts, acknowledging his superiority.

Paul is quoting from Psalm 68 18 but he makes an important change as he does so.

Psalm says...you **received** gifts from men...that you O lord might dwell there.

Paul says, Christ **gave** gifts to men

What does this mean for us?

Imagine yourself at your conversion, captivated by the love and the grace of God in the light of your own sinfulness. You kneel before God and God says, 'I have something special for you. He then 'bestows certain spiritual gifts upon you. Not for your self-congratulation but for service. Romans 12: 1 Cor.12ff; Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4:7 all contribute to the overall picture of what God is giving to his church for his service. The lists are not identical but complimentary, encouraging us all, through prayer, the wisdom of others and the leadership to whom we have entrusted ourselves to discern what that particular gift might be. Like all gifts, we receive rather than demand what gift we wish to have.

To use language which must be interpreted spatially rather than as an indication of importance, some of you have been gifted to place you:

ABOVE and reaching down – spatially not in importance. So, you will be above others as gifted in:

- Leadership
- Teaching
- Prophecy- God's word for God's people at God's time
- Discernment of spirits

AMONG

- Administration– moving amongst people and ministering to their needs.
 - Exhortation and encouragement – strengthening for the journey.
 - Knowledge
 - Wisdom
 - Acts of mercy
 - Hospitality

UNDER AND REACHING UP

- Healing
- Miracles
- Love

And when a church is encouraging folk to discern their gifts and to use them, then God can live amongst his people by his Holy Spirit, leading them forward, supporting each other. Members are able to see the hand of God reaching out to them, the power of God bringing healing to mind, body and spirit, the provision of God, the heart of God, hear the voice of God.

And that is the church which God will then be able to bless as he dwells amongst his people through his Holy Spirit. Now we are blessed with a young vicar full of zeal, spiritual passion and a vision for St George and beyond.

But if his vision is to be implemented, we are going to need folk who with the help of others, through prayer and listening to God are willing both to discern what gifts the Spirit has given them and then to commit to using them within the body of Christ at St George. Discernment and commitment. My concern is not that Nick is bereft of godly ideas and a vision for the future of the church, that the day might come when I look at Nick and say, Nick, I am bored. You haven't had a good idea for a week. What's wrong?' My concern rather is that the implementation of that vision becomes impossible through a dearth of people, discerning the spirits gifts given to them and committed to using them.

I am equally convinced that we need to believe that what is presented to us is not simply a 'good idea' but a 'God idea'. There is a difference and there is always the danger in any church that good ideas can be the enemies of God ideas, resulting in an overfilled programme, an overworked minority, and a fatigued body.

So may I encourage you if you have not done so already to commit yourself to the search of discerning the gifts of the Spirit given to you, to engage with other godly people around

you in conversation, and to commit yourself to a willingness to use that gift for the good of others and the glory of God.

One other characteristic of the church in which God lives by his spirit and that is

3. **Conversion and commitment.**

There is a sense in which preoccupation with numbers in a church is dangerous. Ultimately it is not the quantity of members which is important but the quality of Christlikeness in the membership which is important. But we want to see St George grow numerically, as indeed it is. The early church wanted to see its numbers grow beyond the original; eleven disciples. St Luke in his history of the early church charts its growth with summaries from time to time.

- 'About three thousand were added to their number that day.(2:41)
- 'And the Lord added to their number daily those who **were being saved.**' (2:47)
- 'More and more men and women **believed in the Lord and were added** to their number' (5:14)
- 'In those days when the number of disciples was increasing...' (6:1)
- 'the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests **became obedient to the faith.**' (6:7)

But note numbers grew and the reason numbers grew was because people were coming to faith. There was a correlation between belief and numbers.

Now I get excited as you do perhaps as you see the number of folk joining us week by week growing. But growth comes in different shapes.

1. **There is transfer growth.** In my home group of ten, eight of us, myself included, have joined St George from other churches, feeling that we were led to commit here by a God driven compulsion. If we went around individually this morning and asked the question- transfer growth? I think the numbers would be in the majority. But that's not bad. If what we said about vision and spiritual gifts is true, I believe that God is moving in people equipped and willing to move forward with God here at St George. But ultimately we want

2. **Conversion growth as the New testament church did.**

We want to see people with no faith discover faith; people separated from God become one with God; people who reject God embrace him; people who stumble over Jesus discover he is the way, the truth, and the life.

And that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

People do not come to faith through a personality, a warm feeling when with others, human eloquence and preaching, cups of coffee and cakes, - though all may contribute to the journey they are making. Ultimately It is the work of the Holy Spirit... he alone, convicts of sin, he alone is the agent of new birth. He alone nudges, cajoles, opens blind ears, unstops deaf ears, softens hard hearts, and makes conversion a reality.

- A love which is lavish
- A service which is spiritual and of the spirit
- Conversions and commitment

These are evidence of God building a dwelling in which God dwells by his Holy Spirit.

May I suggest that these are three topics for our personal challenge and the possible topics for our prayers during these coming days.