

Sermon

Work

Without doubt, one of the happiest and most memorable times of my working life was spent, back in the 1990s at a company called British Fittings in West Bromwich. The building I worked in, Monday through Friday 8:30 to 5:30 did happen to stand opposite the *The Hawthorns*, home of West Bromwich Albion, and next door to a McDonalds, but they weren't the reason why I have such fond memories. The work was engaging, interesting and satisfying; the pay was decent – but again they weren't the reasons I hold this time so dear.

So can you guess what the reason was for holding such wonderful memories and taking great joy from this time? The people! My colleagues. Those comrades I worked alongside, laughed with, argued with, got to know very well as we spent so much time together, especially in difficult circumstances.

One colleague in particular, we'll call her Joan, stands out.

Joan was funny, generous and caring. It was Joan who did the Christmas decorations, brought the birthday cards for everyone to sign; baked the cakes; and part of her role was to file the mounds of

paperwork everyone else generated and generally keep the office tidy.

She was the lowest paid; in technical terms she did the most basic tasks, and so therefore was considered the most junior in status. And so it was Joan who was made redundant first when the new management looked at the surface when it came to valuing someone's presence and contribution. I can honestly say, it was the first step towards the decline and eventual break up, of that working environment.

Gifts

Valuing and appreciating who each person is, and what each person does, is key to understanding St Paul when he writes about Christians being seen as a body.

And he looked deeper than that which is visible only on the surface

The body of Christ is the way he chooses to describe the Church, not just the Churches in Rome, but the whole Church, in every place. For him it is a living, diverse and interconnected unity made up of individual believers, each of whom is valued and vital if this *unity*,

this *body*, is to survive and grow, and therefore become that which Christ wants it to be.

Each member was equipped, by the Holy Spirit, with their own unique gifts, all of which were intended to be used together if the Church was to flourish. The gifts then, like now, are given to be used for the good of all, never kept just for our own use. Many of these gifts were what we would call natural, or second nature: the things we just happen to find ourselves being able to do relatively easily.

But we serve a generous God, and St Paul reminded the Romans, and reminds us today, that God wishes to enhance those gifts and even lavish more upon us. This happens when we, as Paul puts it “present ourselves as a spiritual sacrifice” or in other words, offer our time and ability to God for them to be used as needed.

Whether that is in the Church or on some other part of society that God has placed us in. And this can be costly. The more we offer ourselves, the more the sacrifices we make, but also the greater the rewards.

The other point St Paul is keen to make is that no-one, and no-gift, takes precedence over another. Now we may think this is obvious but not to the Roman Church. Rome was a society which functioned through systems of status, honour, hierarchy, gender and class. There

were those considered better than others; there were higher and lower classes; you knew your place and acted accordingly.

But in the Church, it was different. Slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile were all equal and equally valued and important. Paul wasn't doing away with hierarchy – he was redefining it.

And this wasn't only based on the general principle that everyone matters, which is of course true, but by the fact that they all shared the same faith. God has given this same faith to all Christians and it is the foundation of our unity and service.

Faith

Seeing faith as not just our unite'r and leveller but as our foundation is the very starting place for the Church – we have Jesus' own words for it. Peter's answer to Jesus asking *who do you say I am*, is the declaration of faith that changed the course of Jesus' ministry and strategy.

The honour and responsibility of building the Church, was to be given to Peter, not because he was the best healer or exorcist or teacher but because he was the first to unwrap this gift of faith.

It didn't stop him getting it wrong, far from it – even just a few verses on he is rebuked by Jesus and we all know what happened on that

fateful day of Jesus' arrest and trial. But it was to Peter to whom Jesus returned to recommission for the job of building the Church that would be the guardian of his story and the continuer of his work.

And I think Jesus' reaction to Peter getting it right in today's passage is one of sheer delight, excitement and deep joy. Peter must have been quite overwhelmed by Jesus' reaction. Jesus was so excited that he has taken Peter from the first basic step of understanding to the being given virtually the top job in the heaven! That's quite a promotion.

But his reaction is, I think that reflective of God's, when we take seriously our faith, desire to grow in it, and offer the gifts God has given us in God's service. And that can mean anything from turning up to a Church service, to taking on a senior position, or praying a prayer in silence to speaking of a WOW moment.

There is no hierarchy of service; God values all we do, whatever we do and rejoices every time we show up or turn to Him.

Value

Faith does its best work below the surface

12th Sunday after Trinity
Romans 12: 1-8 & Matthew 16: 13-20 St Johns Church, 27 August
2023 HC

If we fail to notice or take for granted or devalue anyone in our community, whatever we think they may or may not contribute, then we will suffer from, what I call, *The Joan Effect*. Not only will we never become a fully functioning and flourishing body, but we will start to break up. And when we look at the worldwide and national church, it's fair to say that this process is well under way. That is why we have to keep this image of a body in mind at all times.

St Paul knew it, and so did Jesus, that's why faith is our foundation and that which unites us and ensures we are all completely valued by God. Amen