

GIFTS & TALENTS SERMON: 12 MARCH 2023 AT GW AND STEEPLE LANGFORD (based on Romans 12:1-21 and Matt.10:1-13)

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

We are now 4 weeks into our Lenten contemplation of skills, gifts and talents, exploring how we recognise and use them; wondering how we as Christians can put them to good purpose in God's name. Last week we heard the parable of the talents, a lesson on how talent and skills are present in all of us in varying degrees of quality and quantity - but neither of which are as important as what we do with them and how hard we try. As we were reminded last week, the servant who did nothing with the money given by his master, learned an important lesson - use it or lose it. The master was not going to reward indolence. God has entrusted us all with gifts, and asks everyone to use them to the best of their ability. So, now we understand that we must use rather than neglect our talents, and indeed try to develop thembut why? That's the question for this week and a clue to one way of answering it is in the word discipleship, which stems from the Latin discipulus, meaning learner. As followers of Christ, we are always learning, adapting our gifts and talents to the ever changing demands of life. Our readings today help us to understand how our gifts and discipleship go hand in hand.

Growing up, many of us will have gone through school wondering why we had to learn certain subjects, especially those we weren't good at. But as adults, we may well have discovered just how useful some of those boring or difficult lessons were to become. Not everything we learned will have been useful, but that will vary from person to person, according to our life experiences. My brother, for example, got very little from formal lessons and left school at sixteen with a few CSEs and no idea of which direction to take - until he began an apprenticeship, and saw a purpose to learning a skill. He has never looked back, and ultimately passed on his knowledge to HND students. We all learn in different ways, and for many, it is through learning on the job....which is how I imagine it was for those earliest followers of Christ.

When Jesus invited the first disciples to follow him and become fishers of men, he expected them to give up their livelihoods to become his students. The fact that they did may come as a surprise to us, but not to those brought up in the Jewish tradition, where to be called by a learned rabbi was considered a privilege. A disciple was in effect an apprentice, who not only learned from the teacher, but absorbed lessons from watching that teacher in action, imitating his approach, and then teaching others. Today's passage from Matthew is in the form of a lesson in which Jesus instructs those first disciples on how to approach the spreading of the Word and proclamation of the good news. It is a list of good works that are to be fulfilled for no reward, other than any hospitality they may be given on their way. They are not to force themselves on any household - if the peace they bring is rejected, they are to withdraw. Just as an aside, I felt that there was something here that perhaps certain Christians down through the centuries had not quite learned - the humility that goes with discipleship, a gift that is all too often missing. The Crusaders, for example, did not possess it, and instead tried to change people's beliefs through force and subjugation - that was never Christ's way.

Matthew's Gospel names some of those early disciples, but we know little of their backgrounds. Matthew had been a tax collector, an occupation despised by Jews, who were reluctant to pay taxes to Roman occupiers. Simon, by contrast, was a Zealot, part of a political group in opposition to the Roman government. Most of the others had been fishermen. This was a group of twelve from disparate backgrounds, which in itself feels relevant - there are no prescribed gifts or talents, and all are capable of learning.

Paul's letter to the Romans echoes the parable of the talents when he writes: "as in one body we have many members and not all members have the same function, We have gifts that differ according to the grace given us". After all, what would be the point in everyone having similar talents? Paul's list is a mix of practical skills, such as teaching, ministry or leadership, and personality traits, including compassion, encouragement, and cheerfulness. As disciples, we are expected to lead by example and there follows a number of ways we can actively demonstrate those gifts that Christ had gone to such lengths to demonstrate personally: among them love, patience, perseverance, prayerfulness and kindness to strangers. Paul is equally clear that leading by example means refraining from getting back at those who attack us - and that requires exercising the gift of restraint. Discipleship involves learning from those who themselves lead by example.

And what about us here today? How do we respond when called to think about how we use our gifts and talents? Our first reaction may be to ask why we should. The answer, as the readings imply, lies in hope or expectation that we might pass on those gifts to others, either explicitly through teaching, or ministry, or implicitly through the way we live, our kindness to others. Ultimately, it's about sharing our talents, be they the practical skills we have learned, or those that are innate and come naturally. As we go through life, we need to be prepared not only to be challenged, to change and even to lose some of our skills in exchange for new ones, but also to pass our experience on. That is discipleship.

Let us pray: Lord, do not let us neglect the gifts you have bestowed on us. Give us courage to exercise these gifts, along with the humility not to use them to our own ends, but for you and your glory. Help us to understand the work you call us to, and to embrace it with willingness and joy.

In Jesus 'name, amen.