

Sunday 5th August, 2018
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a
Psalm 51:1-12
Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Saint Paul writes these wonderful words to the church in Ephesus - To live a life worthy of the calling. What an awesome challenge for those Ephesians. And what an equally awesome challenge for us all.

The call of God to a particular way of life is a deep conviction and calling of the people of God. I have often heard it expressed that there is a purpose other than our own that is being worked through our life. Our goal is to become more responsive and attentive to, and accepting of that larger purpose over which we do not always have a say, such is its power.

In the reading from the letter to the Ephesians, a “worthy” life consists of maximizing one’s particular gifts for the sake of the community that is summoned to be a trusting, caring unity. An “unworthy” life, on the other hand, is one that refuses to maximize one’s gifts or, conversely, that refuses to offer those gifts for the sake of the community.

The Gospel reading picks up this theme, as it uses the metaphor of bread (manna) to speak of utter trust in God, that is, to rely on God to give all that is needed for one’s life. A worthy life is one that trusts completely and that relies only on God’s good gifts. If this accent is a way of seeing coherence in today’s texts, then clearly David in the Old Testament lesson is not “worthy,” because he did not yield his gifts to his community. He refused to live by God’s gifts, trying to seize a peculiar destiny for himself.

In the psalm of confession, however, David does a complete about-face. He turns to God and entrusts his life to God's goodness.

"Hide your face from my sin: and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me." In this act of full (albeit belated) trust, David arrives belatedly at his "worthy calling."

So, this worthy calling of the people of God concerns at the same time one's reliance on God and one's concern for the community. In his utter humanness, one can see David struggling with both these dimensions of his call.

When I use the word "call" here, I need to emphasise that I am talking about the call of every Christian. I am not using it as some narrow description of the ordained ministry of a Deacon or Priest, or even to describe the ministry exercised by key Lay people within a congregation or community.

What I refer to, because it is what I think Paul speaks of, is the Christian vocation: "Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." And so for those who are inclined to think that the word "calling" pertains only to those who are ordained, this statement may come as a surprise. But I firmly believe that all believers are such because they have been "called" by God.

So what of the gifts that Paul lists here in this passage?

Firstly, and most importantly, these gifts; all of them - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers - exist and have been given to us for one reason. And that is to enable "the work of ministry." What emerges here is neither the somewhat wooly notion that "everyone is a minister" nor the even more dangerous notion that ministry is limited to a few, but rather lays out for us a clear understanding that all gifts exist to enhance the larger work of the church.

This is not about us. This is not about us. I cannot say it clearly enough, because I have seen first-hand the damage done by a person who believes that this is *their* calling - this is *their* giftedness - and you had better get out of the way, because I'm the apostle here. Or I'm the pastor in this community. No - these gifts are only given so that they might be used to build up the body of Christ - to tend the sheep, to feed the lambs, to care for the vulnerable, to proclaim the good news.

Secondly, an integral part of "building up" the church, is bringing about and maintaining its unity. Ephesians 4 eloquently describes the motivation behind Christian unity: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (vs. 4-6).

This is a wonderful reminder of what we were baptised into; this web of community that brings together the differing gifts of so many disparate and different people. And these people all come with their own story. Look around you here today. I am sure there are a number of people sitting around you whose stories you know, and may even have shared in. But I also know that there will be many whose stories we do not know.

These stories have helped form each one of us into the person we are today. But more than that, each person here today has been given gifts and skills and expertise and insights because of who they are as God's created being. Our challenge is to understand these gifts and use them to build one another up; to support one another; to love one another, as we work together in God's mission for the world.

Paul's writings challenge us enormously. Just imagine reaching a level of spiritual maturity where you are so focused on God that you can see all people as children of God, where you can find truth in every point of view—even those that differ most from yours, and you can serve anyone and everyone because that is what Christ would do.[8]

This is a stage of faith that most of us never reach. Why? Because we simply cannot let go of our attachment to ourselves. We have too much of a need to be “right” so that we can prove that those with whom we disagree are “wrong.”

But this is the very point of our giftedness; not that we might raise ourself up, but that we might strive for true community and connectedness.

So, today’s readings are a little bit about us - how we can all try and live together, and to work together in our patch. But the readings are also about something wider than that.

Because all Christians (not just we here at St. Andrew’s, and not even just all Anglicans) share all these gifts in common, “every effort” should be expended toward Christian unity.

This reminder may well be painful reading for contemporary Christians, for it recalls the scandal of Christian disunity. Even now, as we celebrate significant developments in ecumenism, many parts of the church still cannot worship together or recognize a common ministry. In this context, the assertion that there is “one faith” and “one baptism” seems less a description of Christ’s body than a statement of the hope toward which believers aim.

“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”. The call is great. The responsibility is great. And the mercy we receive along the way is great, also. Let us work tirelessly towards that unity to which we are called, as we use the gifts we have been given.

In the name of God. Amen