

Spirituality III: 1 Corinthians 12 & 13 (Specifically 1 Corinthians 12:3-13:3)

An introduction to the Spiritual Gifts Wisdom, Knowledge, Faith, Healing, Miracles.

Before we look at the spiritual gifts in detail, it is important to remember Paul's concern that everything we do should be driven by the Holy Spirit. There may have been some in Corinth who may be influenced by other spirits (especially if they have not embraced Jesus as Lord). It is also true that members of the community may simply be wrestling with their human sinful nature; they are keen to be accepted and keen to have a position of influence. This may well explain the tendency to value one gift over another. Theological concerns aside, many people may have more practical concerns about a spiritual search which unleashes over-emotionalism, has potential to divide the body and challenges us as to our genuine openness to God. Even so, the tradition of Methodism and the advantages of the established Churches is that safeguards are in place. In particular, our leadership structure and the discipline of the Church have stood the test of time. This may reassure people that as they open themselves to the ministry of the spirit (both individually and corporately), they can trust that appropriate safeguards are in place. One strong example is the success of established Churches such as Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Brompton (home of the world-famous Alpha courses), or St. Michael le Belfry in York, both of whom have balanced a freedom of the spirit with sound teaching, order and discipline.

As we reflect on the gifts it is important to remind ourselves that they are to be used for the common good – even those that we consider personal to us, such as a yearning for prayer.

Wisdom: On the one hand wisdom is a spiritual gift, on the other scripture reads, 'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. It James 1:5. I especially like the sense in which we can approach God for wisdom and it can be given, even if we have been a total idiot beforehand. On a serious note, there are times when we need to approach specific situations with sensitivity, wary that one approach may be helpful, whilst a different approach could produce the opposite effect. The notion of spiritual wisdom as opposed to earthly wisdom underlines the extent to which we must surrender all decisions to God. Of course there is a difference between asking for wisdom as we try and deal with a difficult situation at work or at Church, and asking for wisdom about what we should eat for Sunday lunch. God gave us a brain, but there are times when we need to reflect on a spiritual level, rather than relying on our own reasoning.

- 1/ Many situations in life are 'no-win' scenarios. Can you think of any examples?
- 2/ Which is more important, the decision that we make, or the way in which we make the decision?

Knowledge: In the context of spiritual giftings, knowledge is more than the native ability to absorb factual information and apply it – although this strength should never be overlooked. In a 'word of knowledge', God reveals something by the spirit that would be impossible to know otherwise. The information may concern a very "earthly" context. There are occasions when we see this in the Old Testament. A good example in the New is Jesus conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. (John 4:4-42) During this conversation he reveals information about her personal circumstance which sharpens the impact of his message. Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman recognises that this information can only have come from God. She affirms Jesus as a prophet. In our pastoral care, whilst we must be wary of acting on a hunch, there are times that the Holy Spirit may point obviously to a particular issue with which an individual is struggling. We may know what it is before they tell us. Alternatively, as they share their experiences and feelings, we may feel that we are not being told the whole truth. This is their prerogative and does not necessarily mean that they are looking to deceive us. It may be that they are not ready to confront the reality to someone else. It may be that they value their own space. However, if we ask a leading question we may find that a fresh area of ministry is opened up. There is a crossover between knowledge (i.e. having a strong impression about the truth of a situation) and discernment (merely sensing that every part of the story does not add up). However, unless you are totally convinced that you have divine revelation and you feel that it is right to share it (in a way that could be quite

distressing for the person concerned), avoid the upfront confrontation (you are not as gifted as Jesus) and try a more subtle approach.

- 1/ Have you ever had, or been on the receiving end of a 'word of Knowledge.'
- 2/ What are the dangers of sharing a word of knowledge if you are right?
- 3/ What are the dangers of sharing a word of knowledge if you are wrong?
- 4/ How would you share a word of knowledge with humility?

Faith: There are those of us who seem to have a head-start when it comes to matters of faith. However, this kind of faith is not the airy-fairy heavenly faith that has limited early use. It is faith seasoned by experience. The person with this gift is a source of encouragement to others.

- 1/ Who has encouraged to you on your faith journey?
- 2/ Did you tell them!

Healing: We must draw a distinction between this kind of healing and miraculous healing. It is best understood as healing in body, mind and spirit. As did Luke, you may have the skills to become a doctor. However, you may also have other skills in caring, listening, praying all of which can help in bringing about healing. Remember that a good doctor will always have a good bedside manner!

- 1/ To what extent is the humble Church coffee morning a place of evangelism and healing?
- 2/ How do we help people see that the service that we offer is inspired by the life of Jesus.
- 3/ What is the difference between 'social services' and 'Christian outreach'?

Miracles: This gift speaks for itself. It is not about coming home and finding that your partner has tidied the house without having been asked. It is not about finding a car parking space in Tesco's following a prayer. It is not about someone's survival (but suffering several broken bones) having fallen backwards from the second floor of a two storey building. The person with the gift of miracles is a channel for the Holy Spirit to do the miraculous. In the early Church it underlined the authority of the apostles. In our contemporary society it is treated with much scepticism, particularly in its association with tele-evangelism. In fairness the gift of miracles and evangelism appeared in parallel within the New Testament – the miracle giving credence to the message. Today there are examples of the miraculous happening, those events having been attested. The rigorous policy applied by the Roman Catholic Church in assessing healing miracles (for example at Lourdes), gives these kind of 'unbelievable' events greater credibility. Within Methodism we have not documented miracles as we should. Most will have been subsumed in Methodist folklore and it is difficult to know the precise facts.

- 1/ Miracles are a difficult subject because our experience is that they do happen, but rarely. This leads us to question whether God is all-powerful, or whether His freedom to act is limited. Even so, god can be a compassionate God who desires the least amount of suffering.
- 2/ Do you know of anyone who has experienced a miracle?
- 3/ Should we pray for miracles?
- 4/ If we do, what miracles should we ask for?