

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and John 2:1-11

Date: 16th January 2022

Place: MUC

Introduction

This morning I want to begin my reflection by sharing some observations and then we will look at the texts for this Sunday.

ONE, Manningham Uniting Church is both homogeneous and diverse. 99 percent of the members are white. I believe 99.9 percent support LGBTQI people.

But MUC is also diverse. We have young and not so young. We have retirees and those who are still working. Each one of you bring different church cultures and church experiences from your previous congregations that you belonged to. There is also a diversity of theologies within MUC.

For example some of you don't believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ and some of you do. Many don't believe in a God who intervenes, and some do. How else are we diverse?

SECOND, we are one congregation with several different services: Fellowship@10, Family@10, Worship@Woodhouse Grove, Together@10, Emerging Church, Café Church and Messy Church. This is positive because we are acknowledging our diversities within MUC.

However, there is a downside. The downside is that some become tribal and parochial and create dissension and disunity. "I belong to Fellowship@10." "We don't like songs. We only sing hymns." "We don't do that at Family@10."

I was told when I arrived at MUC that some people stayed away when you had combined services. As I have said it's great that we have different services but that's no reason to be

parochial. We worship the same God (I hope) and follow the same Jesus but we might have different understandings of whom this God is and what Jesus is about.

A danger that we need to avoid is we turn God into our own image. We make up ideas of God – what God looks like, what God wants, and who God favours and love.

God is ONE and diverse. We are ONE and we are also diverse.

Let us pray...

Paul wrote to the congregation at Corinth, it seems, in response to reports of sharp dissension among the believers. The nature of the conflicts has not been fully explained by modern scholarship, although the issues are clearly identified: rival loyalties to different evangelists, including Paul; the value of spiritual wisdom; lax morality; legal wrangling in pagan courts; the eating of food consecrated to idols; communal practices involving baptism, the Lord's Supper, and speaking in tongues; and the doctrine of the resurrection. No single hypothesis explains the eruption of this series of problems. Much of the conflict can reasonably be attributed to a spontaneous response of a diverse group of people to the message of the gospel which had been delivered by Paul himself.

Situated in one of the most important cities of Greece in the time of the early Roman Empire, the young congregation was undoubtedly made up of persons from a variety of sub-cultures: Jews and Greeks, slaves, freedmen, and a few of noble birth, the powerful as well as the weak, the wise as well as the simple, to list the distinctions mentioned specifically by Paul (1:26-27; 12:13). The surrounding culture was certain to have been reflected in the conflicts troubling the congregation. Sources of disruption had to include sociological, political, and religious factors, as well as personal and theological differences.

So, seeking to bridge the widening gap of division that threatened to destroy the young Corinthian church, as well as to address other matters, the Apostle Paul wrote the First Epistle to the Corinthians during his three years stay in Ephesus.

The church of Corinth, much like the Church of today, saw their diversity sometimes as more of an occasion to compete and divide rather than to complete and provide. They failed to see their diversity impact the entire community.

The church is called to manifest an inclusive Spirit in every aspect of its life. No gift can be discouraged or refused by the leadership, nor its bearer excluded from the membership. All Christians have spiritual gifts, and all rightfully can expect to have these gifts put to use in the community.

Four things I want us to note from 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

First, the source of all gifts is God.

The same spirit, the same Lord, the same God, Paul writes, grants and activates every gift we might lay claim to. Lest we forget, a gift (by definition) is freely given. It is not earned. It is not deserved. It is not meant to inspire competition, envy, or pride.

The spiritual gifts we enjoy are treasures of a vast and generous grace, lavishly given by God at God's discretion.

Second, everyone is special.

Left to ourselves, Paul argues, we can't even get started as Christians. We can't even make authentic confessions of faith. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit," he writes. Meaning: the very fact that we can trust in Jesus, recognize him as Lord, or aspire to follow him *at all*, is a gift. It is a sign that God's Spirit dwells richly within us.

Can we take this in for a moment? Piety is not an accomplishment. Faith is not something we conjure out of blood, sweat, and tears. It's not that we impress God with our stellar faith and thereby earn more magnificent gifts. It is that faith itself — the very possibility of it — *is* the magnificent gift. The sure sign of our belovedness.

Third, the gifts are not “for” us.

Paul tells the church in Corinth that every gift and manifestation of the Holy Spirit exists “for the common good.” My ability to teach, preach, serve, love, pray, sing, hope, trust, write, nurture, or heal is not given to me for my personal enjoyment. It is given solely for the common edification, growth, and blessing of the church. To hoard a spiritual gift is to desecrate it. *I receive for the sake of others.* Which is to say, God apportions spiritual gifts based on the needs of the community as a whole — not on my “personal” needs.

Tribalism and parochialism have no place in the Body of Christ. My gifts carry you, and your gifts carry me. It is God’s intention that we rely on each other. That we need each other. No single person has to have every gift, because the ultimate recipient of God’s generosity is the church, not the individual believer.

And lastly, diversity is God’s intention.

Let’s be clear the list of spiritual gifts Paul itemizes in his letter is by no means exhaustive. It merely illustrates the variety, plurality, and multiplicity of God’s own being. Which makes sense, of course. How can the vastness of our triune God exist in one spiritual gift or ability? How can God the Logos, the Creator, the Judge, the Shepherd, the Servant, the Lamb, the Counsellor, the Bread, the Way, the Truth, and the Life manifest God’s multifaceted self in a single spiritual ability?

Diversity is at the heart of who God is, and so diversity is the right and natural trademark of God’s church. Or at least, it should be. The fact that our gifts are varied is not an accident; it is a reflection of God’s own nature. To say that “everyone is special” in the eyes of our Creator is *not* to say that no one is. It is to tell the truth about our belovedness.

There are many gifts, and one Spirit. May we bind ourselves to this beautiful and essential truth and find new ways to seek the common good together.