

I remember chairing a parish council some time ago that was deeply divided along churchmanship lines. There was an evangelical wing and a catholic wing.

They operated as though it was their God given mission to oppose whatever the other group proposed. I found this most frustrating.

Good proposals and initiatives were thwarted for no apparent reason and the level of animosity at parish council was something I had thought I would never encounter in the life of the church.

In wondering what could be done to rectify this impasse I decided to introduce an opportunity for members of parish council to share something of their Christian journey with one another. My thinking was that if only these people could start to see one another as fellow Christians we might start to get somewhere.

The result was that over time the atmosphere at parish council meetings changed. It happened in subtle ways over time. But it was discernible. People began to appreciate that although they saw things differently they were essentially looking to the one God for guidance.

They might worship God in different ways; but they worshipped the same God. Some liked the ritual and order of catholic worship. Others preferred an emphasis on the ministry of the word and teaching when they gathered to worship.

This experience came to mind as I reflected on the letter to the Ephesians. There the disciples were besought to bear “with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”.

They were reminded that “There is one body and Spirit” and that they were called into “one hope of” their calling. The writer went on to spell out that “some would be apostles, some prophets,

some evangelists, some pastors” etc. “for the building up of the body of Christ”.

Clearly the early church had started to fragment into sectional groups and individuals who chose to interpret the faith in ways that served their particular need or interest without an awareness of how that impacted on those around them.

The writer reasserted the centrality of Christ and reminded the people of Ephesus that their individual giftedness was for the building up of the body. Whatever talent and/or ability they possessed was attributed to them for the benefit of the body as a whole.

It was not primarily for the benefit of the individual, although individuals might derive physical benefit through deploying their gifts. Talent and ability are spiritual gifts for spiritual work.

In the gospel account Jesus was again confronted with a crowd of people. He discerned that they came in search of him not because they “saw signs, but because (they) ate (their) fill of loaves.”

Jesus assessment of the crowd was that they had come not to satisfy a spiritual hunger but rather a physical hunger. They asked “What must we do to perform the works of God?”

He told them that they were to believe in him; following which they asked for sign sighting Moses provision of manna in the desert. Jesus reminded them that it was not Moses who provided manna in the wilderness; rather it was his heavenly Father who provided bread. He then stated that he was the “bread of life”.

This gospel exchange spelt out the struggle between the secular and the sacred; between the spiritual and the material. Jesus wanted the crowd to believe in God. And to believe that in him, that is in Jesus, they would encounter God.

This is a core belief of our faith. It speaks about the very nature of the Godhead.

Ours is a belief in a triune God; God as creator or Father, God as redeemer or Son and God as sanctifier or Spirit. When we encounter God either as Father Son or Spirit we encounter God in God's totality; a perfect union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Such a belief takes us to the very nature of the Christian community. Whilst my evangelical and catholic friends might have disagreed on how they fed on Christ they none the less were of one mind in that when they gathered as the people of God that was what they did, they fed on Christ.

For the evangelical group, Jesus was present when they broke open the scriptures. It was there that they expected to encounter Jesus. For my catholic friends it was in the fellowship of the church and its sacramental ministry that they encountered Jesus, the bread of life.

The question for each of us is how does my individual giftedness contribute to the building up of the body of Christ and help the community of faith to feed on Christ? Do I see that in spiritual ways or do I see only the physical or material?

Part of the answer to that question is our capacity to discern the contribution we are able to make; and to assist others to make their contribution. In doing so, we need to look beyond the physical or material to the spiritual.

Each of us has a part to play. The epistle speaks of people as apostles, prophets and teachers for building up the body of Christ. St Paul's Ipswich is engaged in prophetic work at the moment.

You are contemplating what your future might be like and the priestly leadership you might require to assist you to realize that future. Those with prophetic gifts will be most helpful.

But prophets are not always popular. They often say things people do not want to hear, behave in ways people find strange and are often mistreated for their trouble.

You have heard me encouraging you to listen to one another because Jesus is likely to speak to you through someone you know, even someone you worship with Sunday by Sunday. The prophets of old had the capacity to be present to God, understand their context and communicate in ways people could understand even if they didn't appreciate the message.

So if you feel inclined to dismiss something a fellow parishioner has to say about the future of St Paul's consider whether they might be saying something prophetic? In particular if you find yourself feeling unsettled or threatened by what they have to say remember that is exactly the reaction the Old Testament prophets evoked in others.

Prophets won't necessarily be the people to bring their vision to fruition however. Just as architects don't necessarily have the skills to build the buildings they design; they need engineers to ensure structures are secure, quantity surveyors to acquire the materials required, craftspeople to undertake the construction and artisans to add the finishing touches; prophets won't necessarily have the capacity to realize the future they foresee.

Faith communities need apostles to carry the good news to others who in turn may become apostles, prophets or teachers; and they need teachers to build up the body so that the whole people of God are equipped to realize the future envisioned by the prophets.

Many of us are unable to see what we contribute to the body of Christ. But our willingness or reluctance to contribute enables or inhibits the work of the kingdom.

These readings remind us that we are engaged in a spiritual quest with Christ at its centre. We are not to be diverted by a physical needs, the predominant culture, alternative philosophies, or teaching.

We are engaged in spiritual work. Some may see things differently. They may prefer to worship in ways we find unusual, even strange and they may have different gifts.

But if we are prepared to get to know them; we may find that they have faith journeys very similar to our own. And that they make a significant contribution to the building up of the body of Christ.

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