

Spiritual matters 101

BY BISHOP JONATHAN, BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH

SPIRITUALLY gifted, yet failing to grasp the priorities of God's Kingdom-community, Paul offers the Christians at Corinth an introductory 'Spiritual Matters 101' (1 Corinthians 12 verse 1).

Far from turning the spiritual spotlight onto *us* or onto *our* giftedness, St Paul teaches, the Holy Spirit leads us to confess Jesus as Lord (v.2-3): the Go-Between-God connects us to Christ. Indeed, to be filled with the life of the Holy Spirit is to be 'ec-centric': liberated from a centre in ourselves, into a centre outside of ourselves in Christ.

Paul develops (v.4-6) a Spirit-driven, Christ-oriented, and God-activated theological vision in one of his earliest 'trinitarian' writings. Who is the source of the varieties of gift? The Spirit is. Of the varieties of service, given and received in community? Christ is. The source and true end of every Christian endeavour? It is God, in and through it all. And for what *purpose* are the Spirit's gifts so freely given (v.8-11)? Each gift is bestowed 'for the common good' (v.7).

To have truly grasped 'Spiritual Matters 101' is to be led out of self-absorption into a life orientated towards God's reign or coming-Kingdom. And, through the same Spirit, to live in mutual concern for one another in community: to participate in that form of existence called forth (*ecclesia*) to proclaim and reflect the reconciling love of God in Christ.

Paul is disturbed by reports from Corinth. There, for example, the spiritual gift of tongues is being misused by some, as a sign of personal achievement and superiority over others.

Paul responds with a theological framework for navigating the spiritual gifts. Love, expressed in mutuality and inter-dependence (chapter 12), is to come first in everything. Love, as a reflection of God's love (chapter 13), guides the use of tongues within worship (chapter 14).

Paul writes, "now you are the *body of Christ* and individually members of it" (12 v.27). Like parts of the human body, each person '...made to drink of one Spirit' (v.13) has an indispensable contribution to make to the church. As God has arranged the members of a human body 'as he chose,' so God gives gifts to the church (v.18). In conscious reference to those who promote themselves, Paul accords a higher priority to spiritual gifts which build up the body in love.

Paul's choice of the word 'gift' provides a critique of spiritual elitism. For gifts are neither achievements, nor grounds for superiority. Rather, they reflect the over-flow of God's abundant love and are to be welcomed with a gratitude expressed in love. For, as Paul says, gifts are freely given, that all the baptised may learn to 'care for one another.' (v.25). May it be so among us!



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Front page photo: Parents and children at 'Cloud Tots' in All Saints, Gurnard