



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 28th May 2023, Pentecost

For the common good by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Acts 2:1-4

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

For some time now, we've known that the Presbyterian Church faces an impending crisis. The tip of the iceberg is, quite simply, that there aren't enough younger ministers coming through to replace those who are retiring.

And for a denomination that has largely built itself on a parish model – one minister called to a pastoral charge – this is a problem. There simply won't be enough ministers to fill all the vacancies.

The good news, we're looking to do something about it. For instance, I'm heartened that in our Presbytery, we have employed a Ministry Enabler whose role is solely to encourage people to consider a calling to ministry.

I'm waiting for the call to be the poster child for that recruitment drive. You could be this guy! But in seriousness, it is an immense privilege to be in ordained ministry; it's a gift for a community to provide for your needs so that you can devote yourself to the study of scripture, to prayer, and to journeying with a community in the ups and downs of its life, to invest in the lives of people. I love my job. And I'd encourage others to consider it.

But today is not about that. In fact, I think the desire to plug the hole of our minister shortage is indicative of a much deeper problem in the church. That is, a crisis of vocation. So today, I want to reflect on that word: *vocation*, or *calling* – especially in the light of Pentecost.

When we say that someone has a calling, what do we mean? Well, we usually mean that someone has an especially strong commitment to a particular line of work and a personal conviction tied up with their values that it's more than a job.

In the church, we talk about ordained ministry in this way – with good biblical basis. It's seen as a continuation of the prophetic tradition in which people like Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah received a special calling to proclaim the Word of God in the midst of the people.

The problem is that by emphasising the call to ordained ministry in the church, we've inadvertently deemphasised the call or vocation of the whole people of God in the power of the Spirit.

The instinct to want to plug the hole of our minister shortage by recruiting new ministers is fine, even necessary and good, but it doesn't address the underlying issue that we have become a church that is very minister-centric and so goes into crisis mode when we don't have enough ministers. We've become a church that, I think, has an impoverished theology of vocation of the whole people of God.

All of this doesn't square particularly well with the reality of Pentecost – the birth of the church, in which the Holy Spirit is poured out *on all believers*. So today I would

like to suggest three things about how we talk about vocation – or calling – in light of Pentecost.

The first is that God's call belongs *not* first and foremost to any one person or to an exclusive group within the church (like clergy). It belongs collectively to the whole people of God.

Have you noticed that we talk about calling almost exclusively in individualistic terms (both within the church and outside it). A person, for example, is called to a particular vocation. Now there's nothing wrong with that. But I would argue, based on our readings from Corinthians today, that Paul wants us to think about community.

Only together are we the one body of Christ. *Only together* through the waters of baptism do we share in his calling to be united with God and with one another in love. *Only together* are we a royal priesthood participating in his priestly ministry for the world. *Only together* are we the burning bush – a receptacle of God's burning, holy, and living presence.

Together – not alone. It means, at least in Paul's understanding, that you can't talk about *your* calling without talking about the community of faith in which you belong and exercise that calling. Because to follow Jesus is to turn to one another in loving service.

We are called to be a community first and foremost. A people of God gathered around the table, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, every gender, ethnicity, orientation. All are welcome here.

There's a radical acceptance and inclusivity in this. And it leads me to the second thing; which is that God has called each and every one of us: regardless of status, ability and age, gender, or ethnicity. God has called you. God has called me.

There's something radically egalitarian about the promise of Pentecost. A promise that undermines and dismantles the power hierarchies that exist in society. You know, the Roman society in which Paul ministered was very hierarchical. Some people literally had more worth than others, depending on how far up the hierarchy they were. At the bottom were slaves, who lacked basic human rights. They were less than human.

And so, in this context, Paul's assertion that the Holy Spirit has gifted and called each person – Jew and Gentile, slave and free – dismantles the system. Each and every person, even slaves, has been bestowed with a unique gift of the Holy Spirit, empowered to minister in Jesus' name. Each and every person is a necessary and fundamental part of the body of Christ. Each person belongs. Each person is needed.

Such an assertion is dignifying, humanising. And still very valid today.

And this leads me to the third and final thing I want to say. With the radical acceptance and grace in God's new community, there is also challenge and responsibility. Paul makes it abundantly clear that our gifts are *for* something. They're not to be hoarded for ourselves. They are *for* the building up of the body; they are *for* the common good.

You belong. You are needed. And precisely because you are needed, you have a responsibility to give yourself as a blessing for others. To give yourself in loving service. When you are you, we are richer for it. More fully the body of Christ.

Hence why, every week, we stand together and pray for our offering. And we're not offering money and food. In Christ, the servant King, we are offering our whole selves up to God for the common good.

For the common good. It's possible to use our gifts in other ways isn't it. To abuse our calling by using our gifts to establish influence and assert power over others. We see this all the time in the church – and ordained ministers because of the status they often hold in a church are more in danger of this.

You might remember there was a news scandal in New Zealand last year about a large independent, Pentecostal church and its leadership. It was uncovered that this church placed incredibly high expectations on its volunteers to the point of burnout and emotional abuse. These harmful practices were underpinned by a dangerous theology of vocation that essentially expected people to sacrifice themselves for the church. A crisis of vocation – albeit of a different sort than in the Presbyterian Church right now.

In response, I would say that our calling in Christ is first and foremost something we *are* rather than something we *do*. No one's calling is to serve on the morning tea roster! That's not a spiritual gift. It may be an aspect of how you live out your calling to serve others. But the problem is that, if calling is primarily something we *do*... then if we can't do it any longer, our very identity is called into question.

You *are* a beloved child of the living God, whose Spirit calls you by name to belong. You *are* a member of the body, regardless of what you do. At a time when people's lives are busier than ever before, the church needs to say this very clearly I think.

I want to finish with a vision. A prophecy, if you will, given its Pentecost. That St Heliers Presbyterian Church would be a radically welcoming and inclusive community in which all are celebrated, in which all are dignified, and in which all are empowered to be fully and wonderfully themselves for others. May we be a people devoted to loving one another, to giving ourselves for one another, united together in our diversity in Christ through the one Spirit of truth and grace. Amen.