

Read

What sort of city do we live in? The most famous phrase used about London was said by Dr Johnson, he of the dictionary, in 1777 who said “Why, Sir, you find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London. No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.” London, according to Dr Johnson is a vibrant place that no-one would want to leave. I came across a more negative opinion recently in a book I’ve been reading where people who live in London were interviewed by the author, who wrote up the interviews in a book with the catchy title *The Days and Nights of London Now, as told by those who love it, hate it, live it, left it and long for it*. This is what “Jo the Geordie” said in the book:-

“London is a vast and lonely place. If you go there you have to take a bit of Newcastle with you. In Newcastle, there’s base-level love. In London, the base feeling is that you’re either a terrorist, or a rapist, or both, until you’ve proven otherwise. You can feel a southern coldness on you when people look your way. There is a Londoning process, a hardening that creeps up on you. There’s this thing that you’re supposed to be part of in London. But what is it? That’s the million dollar question. Everyone’s there because they’re searching, aspiring.”

Maybe you recognise that description, maybe not. What is undeniable from both descriptions, both Jo the Geordie and Samuel Johnson’s, is that London is a place that attracts the outsider. People come here looking for something. It draws people. As a result, you find in London a diversity that you don’t find so much elsewhere in the UK over such a large area. Your experience of this diversity may be positive or negative, but it creates challenges.

The situation then is much the same as it was in Rome when Paul was writing his letter to the Romans. The Roman Empire had conquered much of the known world, with the result that there was free movement of goods and people across previously well-guarded national boundaries. And people tended to move towards the great urban centres such as Rome, with the result that you had lots of people inside the city walls jostling for space and preferment. This created challenges for the church in Rome, first in knowing how to live in the society around them and secondly how to cope with the numbers of believers with different customs and ways of doing things to them. In verse 2 of Romans 12 Paul writes that the Roman Christians should not conform to the pattern of the world,

and in the first application of that he directs his teaching in the verses we are looking at this morning to how individuals in the church should behave in the church, maybe because Paul sees this as the most pressing application of the message of the first two verses. Given the similarities between Rome then and London now, it's a message that we would do well to take note of.

What we see Paul instructing the Christians then in Rome to do, and, I believe, the Christians in London today to do is three things. Firstly, have a right view of ourselves. Secondly, have a right view of the church. Thirdly, have a right view of ourselves in the church. We'll look at these three in turn.

Firstly, we should have a right view of ourselves. Look at verse 3. It's quite unusual in Paul's writing. Normally when he writes to a church he writes to 'you plural'. 'Dear church in Ephesus/Thessalonica/Galatia, this is what *you together* should do.' Here however he recognises that for the church to be right, each individual member of it needs to take responsibility for their role in it. And he instructs the individuals of the church very directly – "I say to every one of you". There's the implication that what Paul is saying is serious, we need to take it seriously, we need to take care to apply it carefully. So let's take a close look at what we need to do individually.

What do we have to do? "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you." *Sober judgment*. What a rare commodity that is these days. If you look on internet bulletin boards or the comments sections in online blogs or newspapers then I wish you good luck in searching for sober judgment. It seems to me that the prevailing mood of those sharing their thoughts these days is very judgmental but not at all sober. There's a scene at the beginning of the Bruce Lee film *Enter the Dragon* that sums it up quite nicely. Bruce Lee is teaching one of his martial arts students and asks him a question. His student responds "I think ..." but gets no further as Bruce Lee slaps him on the head and says "Do not think. *Feel*." It's almost as if he is writing a manifesto for people today. People spout forth judgment on all sorts of things based on how they feel, without really engaging brain. Paul is saying, don't do that. Think.

And think *soberly*. What does Paul mean? Well, think of what happens when someone thinks drunkenly. My experience of drunkenness is not that great – I tend to leave a party just as it gets going – but from my limited experience it seems to me that when someone is drunk they tend to think in one of two ways. They either have a very high view of themselves or they have a very low view of themselves. They believe they can do anything, or they believe they can do nothing right.

Paul asks us to think *soberly*. We should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought, he says. Paul helps us in this by referring to the faith God has distributed to each one of us. This faith says this: I am totally and wholly deserving of rejection and abandonment by God. Because Jesus was rejected and abandoned on the cross for me, and because he rose again and broke the power of death, I am accepted by God. It's not something I can claim any credit for. It's all down to Jesus. Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought. Think in accordance with the faith.

But equally don't despise yourself. Jesus died for you because he put such a high value on your life. For the Son of God to die for you, *to get you*, tells you how much of a value he puts on your life. Again, think in accordance with the faith. But more than that. As we'll come on to see, Paul says that each of us has a gift. Look at verse 6 – we – each of us – have different gifts. What does this mean? Well, surely, it must mean that there is no reason for anyone who is a follower of Jesus to feel that they're not required or surplus to requirements. However young or old you are, whatever your background, however different you feel to others in the church, Paul is saying “you have a part to play”. So, don't think too highly of yourself but don't think too lowly of yourself. Think soberly.

Second, we should have the right view of the church. Paul here uses the phrase “body” to describe the church. Now, this is a very familiar phrase to use in relation to a church, but let's think about what this means. What are the main points of being a body? The two points that Paul refers to here are its differentness and its inter-linkedness. Let's take these in turn. Verse 4: “each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function”. So let's think about a basic body function, saying walking across the room. You need your eyes to look where you are going, you need your inner ear balance mechanism to keep you from falling over, you need your legs to walk, you need your heart to pump blood to your legs and you need your brain to hold everything together. There is one purpose – to walk across the room - with different bits of the body doing different things in pursuit of that one purpose. It's fairly automatic isn't it, or it should be unless there is something wrong with a particular body part. If your inner ear balance mechanism is up the spout, then you will find it very hard to walk across the room – you're more likely to fall over. If you've broken your legs then you won't be able to walk across the room at all. If your heart has stopped then you've got bigger problems to worry about than walking across the room. There are different functions played by different body parts in the walk across the room. Each of them is vital to achieve the common purpose.

Which makes it puzzling, doesn't it, why we see churches where they are all made up of the same sort of person with the same sort of skills. There's maybe a temptation in some churches to think that it's all about teaching the Word of God, and little if any attempt is made to engage with the society around the church in terms of social action. In other churches the key thing is to show love and dignity to all irrespective of background but ignore the reading and explanation of God's word. Paul is saying here is that diversity in church is not only a good idea, but an essential thing. Different people in the church will have different roles. Each of them are important. The danger is that we look at the thing we are doing as being THE important thing in the church and one that should take precedence in terms of time, volunteer support, funding or publicity more than any other. What Paul is encouraging us to do here is to recognise that, just as a healthy body needs a large number of different organs to be doing different things, so a healthy church needs a large number of different people to be doing different things.

Paul also says that as members of the same body we are inter-linked. Verse 5: "we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others". "Belongs to the others" means that each part of the body is linked to the others – each is part of the whole. Let's take a different activity, say playing the piano. So, the key parts of the body in playing the piano are the two hands and, for me at least, the right foot which is what you use to play the sustain pedal. Now, that's a fairly small set of body parts – two hands and one foot. So what happens if we cut off the two hands and the right foot and see how well they do? I don't think that they would work so well. The hands need the arms to support them, the heart to pump blood to them, the brain to tell them where to go, the muscles and ligaments to drive their movements and so on. Each part is interlinked. Paul is saying to Christians is that we need to be part of an interlinked community of believers.

What Paul is saying here has I think particular importance for our age. In previous ages I think people were far more keen to establish themselves in a community than before. You could work at a place of work knowing that it was unlikely that you would get the chop unless you did something bad. That has changed. You would live in the place that you grew up in knowing that those you grew up with were likely to be doing the same. That has changed. Here's a shocking truth for you young folk - people used to engage with each other by talking to each other and meeting with each other, rather than pressing buttons on some electronic device. That has changed. The whole concept of community has become degraded. That change has influenced how many see churches – as somewhere to visit without really committing to it, as a resource for you to draw on rather than a community for you to form part of. Being in a community is challenging, it makes demands on

you, you sacrifice some privacy and freedom. But Paul is saying here that we belong to each other as members of a body. The implication is that we need each other – just as two hands and a foot wouldn't have much chance of playing the piano on their own, so none of us are designed to be separate from a community of Christians that we commit to and that we make ourselves accountable to. There are dangers in trying to sit on the outskirts, to not really being part of any church. There's an old story told of a Christian visiting the vicar of his church who was sitting in front of his open fire and the Christian told the vicar as to how his life was very busy and he decided that he wouldn't be coming to church any longer, but not to worry because he was still really focussed on following Jesus. Without saying anything, the vicar reached with the tongs into the fire and pulled out one of the glowing coals and placed it away from the fire on a different part of the fireplace. The vicar didn't say anything but they both watched the coal getting gradually less and less warm until it become entirely cold. Paul is saying commit to a Christian community.

So, Paul teaches us to have a right view of ourselves and of the church. Finally, Paul teaches us to have a right view of ourselves within the church. Look with me at verse 6 to 8. Paul tells us to exercise the gifts we have. If your gift is prophesying, do it; if it's serving, do it; if it's teaching, do it; and so on. Not to be falsely modest – “oh I could never do anything here” – but to do what we are gifted to do. Note that this follows what Paul has said about the church and about each member of the church belonging to the other members. So we are to exercise gifts in that context – not as a way of increasing our profile or drawing attention to ourselves, but because we are playing our part in the body. In his inaugural address as American President, John F Kennedy famously said “ask not what your country will do for you, but ask what you will do for your country” and there are echoes of that here.

Let's take a quick look at these gifts. It's an odd list and it isn't, of course, a complete list – you only have to look at other lists in Ephesians and Corinthians to see that other gifts are mentioned there. Also, Paul includes at least two items which elsewhere all Christians are commanded to do. Looking at the gift of encouragement, it's clear from Hebrews chapter 3 that all of us should be encouraging one another daily. Looking at the gift of giving, it's clear from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 and 1 Timothy 6 that is the responsibility of all with resources to do so to give generously to support others in the church. Maybe it means that some people are especially gifted at encouraging and giving, but that does not take away the responsibility of the rest of us to obey those parts of Scripture that instruct us to encourage and give. Also, some of the gifts are extremely general – that word in verse 7 “serving” is a translation of a word that is used in the book of Acts both for teaching God's world and waiting on tables. Which does Paul mean here? There's no indication.

So far, so confusing. What lessons can we draw from these items? Well I think we can learn something from the range of gifts. If we think of spiritual gifts, then we would naturally think of those gifts that “look supernatural”, if I can put it that way. Prophecy is mentioned here, and that’s a good example. Prophecy here means speaking under divine inspiration. This is the notion that from time to time the Holy Spirit gives to individuals messages of use for the church body. But alongside prophecy sits the gift of mercy, the best example of which in Scripture is the Good Samaritan in tending to the needs of the traveller who had been attacked by thieves. How much of a spiritual gift do we consider it is to bind someone’s wounds or pay for their stay at an inn like the Good Samaritan did? Maybe not so much. But Paul is saying that all those things are important. Someone in this congregation once said to me “Simon in this world there are piano players and piano shifters and I’m one of the piano shifters”. Do we value the spiritual work of shifting pianos as much as the spiritual work of playing pianos? I hope we do.

Also, note how Paul includes special instructions for some gifts – If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ... if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully”. Let’s take these in turn. Prophecy is to be done “in accordance with your faith”. The commentators say that “your faith” here means “THE faith”, that is to do it in accordance with Christian truth. Don’t get carried away into saying things that contradict Scripture – God doesn’t contradict himself. Whenever anyone gives a word in a service in a Sunday that they feel is a word from God, we encourage people to test it against God’s word, because that’s the yardstick used in Scripture. If you give, give generously. Why? Because in your giving you may be tempted to give grudgingly or sparingly. If you lead, do it diligently. Why? Because leading is a heavy burden and there’s a temptation to do the bare minimum rather than make sure that things are done properly. If it is to show mercy to do so cheerfully. Maybe because tending to the needs of the lonely and hurting is hard work, and it is not to be done reluctantly or patronisingly.

I can’t end the sermon without giving some points of practical application around gifts. The instruction Paul gives here is to not have too high a view of ourselves, but to exercise the gifts we have been given for the good of the body of which we form part. How do we know what gifts are ours? Scripture is silent on this – Paul assumes in his letters that people know what their gifting is. I’m fairly sure that not everyone does. I think that there’s maybe a nervousness around this, as if everyone else instinctively knows what their gifts are but only I don’t, that everyone has a hotline to

God and gets told that they are gifted in this or that, but I don't. Well, I don't receive words from the sky about my gifts. That's not my experience as to how these things work. So here are my tips for discovering our gifts. But these are *my* thoughts – they don't come with Scriptural authority.

Firstly, it's usually true that if you're gifted in something you will feel a draw towards that activity. Do you love to have people around you in your home? You may be gifted in hospitality. Do you get a thrill from seeing others built up in their faith? You may be especially gifted in encouragement.

Secondly, pray, pray and pray again that God would open doors for you to try stuff and that you would find out what your gifts are.

Thirdly, try stuff. Unless you try teaching, you won't know if you are gifted at it. So volunteer to lead a Bible Study at your discipleship group. Unless you try a mercy ministry, you won't know if you are gifted at it. So look for opportunities to help the old and infirm, or the marginalised. Take opportunities as they are offered. Don't be shy – remember think of yourself with sober judgment – don't downplay the fact that you have a role to play in this church.

Fourthly, ask your Christian friends what you are good at and - here's the hard bit - what you are not so good at. They can see from your trying stuff what's working and what's not.

I'll give you two examples from my life as to how I have searched for my gifts, in case that helps. I have for a long time felt drawn towards teaching so I asked Vincent back in the late 90s if I could preach, having led studies in my homegroup. Vincent quite sensibly asked me to wait and to try leading services first. I did that and found that I enjoyed it and others told me that it was something they appreciated, so I moved on to preaching. I have really enjoyed preaching here, and see it as part of my responsibility to this church as someone with a gift of teaching. Different thing – a few years back, I thought I'd have a go at doing youth work here, since I'd never tried it. I did Thursday club for a couple of years and found that I was not very good at it. So I know it is something I'm not gifted at. Now I'm not holding myself up as the example you should all follow, but at least it's a way that I have found has worked in understanding what I am best equipped to do. Paul writes to us individually so I'll say to each of us that follows Jesus – I think that in order to put this passage into practice we need to find out what our gifts are, so let's find a way of identifying our gifts, then exercise them.

Finally, look at the source of the gifts. Verse 6 – the gifts are as a result of the grace given to us. Our gifts come from grace, from God’s free gift of Jesus to take our place in bearing the punishment for the things we have done wrong to restore our right relationship with God. That is the essence of why we exercise the gifts – because we are grateful for the supreme gift that we have received. That’s the key thing to bear in mind here – we are one body *in Christ* – everything we do must be to his praise and glory. Whatever we do is a reflection of and response to what Christ has done for us. To focus on that, to make that the key driver of what we do in this place, that’s the key.