

Isaiah 49: 1-7
Psalm 40: 1-12
I Corinthians 1: 1-9
St. John 1: 29-42

Epiphany II 2023.

“So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
I Corinthians 1: 7a

It's unlikely that you had Mrs. Ogden as a teacher in high school. Mrs. Ogden's job was to try to teach teenagers how to write sentences and paragraphs; and to use proper punctuation. Bless her, Mrs. Ogden had her work cut out for her – the study topics were about as exciting as watching paint dry. Did you have a teacher who was assigned just to teach English grammar?... Think about you and your teenage classmates... You know what Mrs. Ogden was up against...

One point Mrs. Ogden tried to teach us is the difference between a personal letter and a business letter. If you're writing a letter to a friend, you can begin with a funny story about your pet hamster... On the other hand, if you're writing a *business* letter, whatever you do, she said, don't write about your pet hamster! Get straight to the point! No stories about hamsters in a business letter – unless maybe, you want to open a pet store...

Mrs. Ogden's point was, good letters have a certain structure... We see that, in the second reading for today. It is the opening of the first New Testament letter from Paul to the Church in the city of Corinth. We begin our letters with the date and “Dear So-and-so...” Paul was a well educated guy. Well-educated Greeks began *their* letters by saying *who* is writing – putting that at the beginning, rather than the end – then, who they are writing to; and a short expression of good wishes. So, Paul begins First Corinthians by identifying it's Paul writing, that he's writing to the Church of God in Corinth,, and then, wishes them God's grace and peace.

In most of Paul's letters, he then gives thanks, and includes what he wants to write more about. Sure enough, today we read, “I give thanks to my God always for you...” While giving thanks, Paul introduces what he wants to give thanks *for*, later in the letter – “You [the Corinthians] aren't lacking in any spiritual gift...” Later in the letter, Paul's going to write a lot more about how God has given spiritual gifts to the Corinthians, and all Christians...

So once again, the letters of the day would begin (1) who is writing; (2) who they're writing to; (3) some form of good wishes or blessings. Then Paul would usually give thanks right away, and include what he wants to tell his readers...

I invite us all to consider – when talking to a friend or a stranger, are the first words out of our mouths words of gratitude and thanksgiving?... We live in a culture in which people often begin by *complaining* a lot... I suggest we are to be counter-cultural here – to be normal in an abnormal world – and to give thanks...

What is it that Paul wants to talk about in his letter? Paul kind of prepares his readers as he gives thanks: “So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...” Well, when Jesus Christ is fully revealed, when he comes again – all things will be made new. Meanwhile, the Corinthians “are not lacking in any spiritual gift...”

The Corinthian Christians might well have been thinking that they *were* lacking in some spiritual gifts... They were living in a culture which had all kinds of expressions of spirituality, but many people were hostile to Christians, and to the gospel. The size of the Church (compared to their obstacles) would have seemed really daunting...

Paul mentions in the letter that they were mostly a working-class congregation (not many were of “noble birth”)... They weren’t always sure how to respond when people made clever arguments against the gospel. So, this was a congregation that was probably feeling a little overwhelmed – did they have all they needed to do God’s work? Paul’s emphatic answer is “Yes! You – the Christians in this city are not lacking in any spiritual gift you need. The Spirit of Jesus dwells in you, and equips you to live to honour God our Creator...” God has given you all you need, to do God’s work...

Now, these words of Paul were penned a long time ago. But they are part of the canon of our Bible. These are not just *human* words, but an inspiring message for the whole Church, for all time: “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift.” These are also words for you and me today, “The congregation is not lacking in any spiritual gift...”

There have been a lot of technological changes in the last 2000 years. But are we really that different from the Church in Corinth? St. Brice’s ended last year with a financial deficit... In our culture today, there are many people who are indifferent, or even hostile, to the Christian gospel. Some of us have family members have drifted away from being close to Christ and their adopted Church family. We need to take Paul’s words to heart too: “We are not lacking in any spiritual gift...”

We aren’t just passive puppets... You and I are agents; ambassadors – we have roles to play, with God’s help, to live joyfully for him. We absolutely need God’s help. God *will* help us. But we aren’t to sit on our hands. If we’re using our voices to praise God, we need to open our mouths and wiggle our tongues. If we’re using our hands to help a brother or a sister, we need to dare to reach out... We all have an essential part to play, in building up the Church, and to pour love into a troubled and broken world...

We all have something to do... There are many examples we can think of. But I’m just going to mention one this morning, from today’s gospel reading, John 1. The context is that the Lord Jesus is just beginning his ministry. John the Baptist is preaching, and the Lord is gathering a group of disciples around him.

Now, one of the people who overheard the message of John the Baptist, and heard that Jesus is the Christ, was a fisherman named Andrew. Andrew already seemed to have a sense that there is something very special about Jesus of Nazareth. He wants his family members to meet Jesus; but, maybe he isn't quite sure what to say! So, he decides to bring his brother, Simon Peter, to encounter Jesus for himself. Andrew invites Simon Peter along. Simon Peter and Andrew and others live with Jesus for years, learning to walk God's true way... After Jesus' resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, Simon Peter became an amazing preacher, minister and evangelist. But it *began*, we read, with Andrew inviting his brother to "come and see..."

We might feel that we could never help people to encounter Jesus for themselves. Almost none of us went to theological college. We don't have all the answers. We probably all know that our lives aren't perfect – some of us have done some real doozies in our past!... But do you know what?... None of that matters. It's only *God* who can enter people's hearts and lives by the Spirit of Jesus. But we're agents; ambassadors. Like Andrew, we can say, "Come and see..."

Please don't be put off if some people reply, "No; thanks – not right now, anyway."

- Invite them to a Sunday service.
- Invite them to Alpha, *especially* if they have doubts, or don't even know if the way of Jesus is for them. The next Alpha course will start in the parish hall a week from this Wednesday (January 25), 6:15pm with supper...
- The Band here at St. Brice's is going to put on a free concert on Saturday, February 18, 7pm.
- Some of the guys might – might – be putting on a pancake supper on 21 February, just before Lent. There'll be no charge, but people can drop a few coins in a basket if they want.

There are all kinds of ways we can invite, to "come and see..."

We're not the biggest Church by any means. We're not the richest Church by any means. We don't have an amazing Sunday School program. One or two of us have gray in our hair. But I happen to know you're an amazing Church family... I'm not saying we're perfect. But I'm proud of you, and what you're doing. And I believe God is proud of you too. We are not lacking in any spiritual gift. We are called to be his agents and ambassadors in so many ways. One of those ways is, to learn to say, "Come and see..."

Amen.