

Sermon : 1 Corinthians 14 v. 26-40

Last week Jonathan was taking us through the first half of ch.14 of 1 Corinthians, and we looked in particular at the gift of **prophecy** and its use and benefits within the church community.

Today we're considering the rest of that chapter and, in particular, three problem areas - all of which were very real for the early church in Corinth at that time . These have to do with '*utterances*' - that is, words spoken out loud within the believers' meetings.

- The use/misuse of speaking in tongues
- The use/misuse of prophecy within a church gathering
- Women

But, as we concentrated on the 'prophetic' last Sunday, I'm not going to spend much time on that today - just pay it a cursory visit in a few moments!

Before we look in any detail at these verses, I'd like us to consider two important broader questions :

1. **Who** is it that we have come to Worship?

2. **Who** benefits from our Sunday morning worship -us or God?

Because how we answer these questions will colour our thinking about not only this passage from 1 Corinthians, but **all** the verses relating to *how* and *why* we worship together on a Sunday morning.

The whole of our life is an act of worship - or should be. Right?

When we give our lives to Christ, and turn the Lordship over to Him, we don't need to compartmentalize it into - the 'religious bit', the work bit, the family bit, the recreation bit or whatever.if he is to be Lord **at all**, He needs to be **Lord of all**.

So, when we come together week by week, we are coming from whatever our week and home situations have been like; we come as we are, *just as we are*, to worship God.

And so here today, together, we are worshipping **God the Father through His Son Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.....**

God is a mystery, He is Spirit, He is Truth, He is Creator and provider. He is also paradox - He is love and justice, Lion and Lamb, Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, Powerful and personal, almighty and Father, majestic and Daddy.....He is all these and more.....*(you can add your own adjectives!)

And so what we do here together on a Sunday morning really does matter!

We could legitimately ask the questions -

Does God benefit from our times together?

Do we?

In order to exist or function or be **WHO HE IS**, God does not **NEED** our worship; (you might not like my saying this)He *may* be pleased when we offer Him our worship, it is even possible to 'minister' to Him; some Christians use language like '*Lord we really want to **ble**ss you this morning*', and we do hope, don't we, that we are somehow giving of our best, 'doing it well' and glorifying our Lord. There's a song which begins, '*let my praise to you be as incense*' - a fragrant offering to God, words taken from PS 141.2

*" May my prayer be set before you like incense;
may the lifting up of my hands
be like the evening sacrifice..."*

So, back to the verses before us.....

Although I don't see these verses from 1 Corinthians 14 as a recipe for our worship-times together, what St.Paul says here to these early Christians speaks to us too.

First of all, I want us to deal with the rather awkward verses about women not speaking in church so that we can get back to the other issues relating to orderly worship -

vv. 34-35 ' women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.'

Perhaps I should stop right now, forget the rest of the sermon and you can all go home early. Maybe this is Jonathan's idea of a

joke, (asking a female to speak about this topic - I guess it was going to either Sue or me!) or maybe I should just ignore these two verses, **as some commentators have done**, dismissing them as not being original, not written by Paul and therefore **not worth our time and effort**.

But that's a little too convenient, and anyway, this is **not** the only place in which St Paul said controversial things about women! One of the problems with **this** text is that it can tend to cause people to write off Paul as a *crusty old bachelor* who hated women and who felt threatened by their using Holy-Spirit-inspired gifts.....but that is not the case, as can be seen from many passages where he speaks with love and warmth and praise for the ministry of women.

So, do these verses mean that women should not speak in church services at all ?

Well, clearly I personally don't believe that to be the case, having been called at the age of 16 to the ordained Ministry - At that time I wasn't aware of God saying "*I want you Ruthy in full-time ministry, but you're not to say anything in church!*"

And it is also clear from 11 v. 5 that women prayed and prophesied in church (you may remember Jonathan's sermon from March 28 about the head-coverings issue in Corinth).....It is also clear in chs. 12-14 that women are given spiritual gifts and are encouraged to use them in the body of Christ. So Paul is **not** forbidding women from the exercising of gifts, but he **wants** to regulate it.

Putting it into context, the problem here was one of disorder and confusion. And that is true for the other two problem areas of tongue-speaking and prophecy which he addresses here. For the women, it may well have grown out of the very freedom that Christian women had found in ministry in Corinth.....

In the Jewish and Greek communities women's ministry was '*put down*'; certainly the Jews didn't allow it at allAnd in the Corinthian culture, women were not allowed to confront men in public.....however, in the **Christian church**, women were permitted to minister, under the recognition of the principle of headship. IN this case it seems they had gone too far, and were letting their freedom carry them away. They were asking questions and debating the issues which were being raised in the meeting, thus it was being turned into more of a discussion group.

As Paul had indicated earlier, some had abandoned their head-covering - a sign, in Corinth, that would show they *were* happy to be under the leadership God had instituted - and this in itself would cause non-Christians in the city to disregard the words of the Christians because of this violation, and therefore be a bad witness.

Paul's concern relates **more** to promoting unity and integrity, and those matters which relate to the up-building of the church.

Which is what the whole passage is about

Paul is not saying it is forbidden for women to minister in church;

it is not forbidden for them to pray or prophecy or teach. The Greek word used here is 'laleo' - a common word for conversation, it is the *speaking*, literally the '*chattering*', the conversation that

was going on with which they got carried away, especially with this exercising of the new freedom they had found.

I guess its a bit like us - only more so - in St Augustine's during Communion - how often do we turn and chat to our neighbour while others are going up to the alter-rail to receive the bread and wine.....??

And the place where Paul says they ought to have their discussions is at home, where they can talk things through with their husbands. If you're anything like us, those sorts of discussions can be lively and ongoing, so then home is a good place for them! Of course, if you're a single woman then the bit about talking 'things over with your husband at home' isn't relevant, but you *could* talk to others over coffee in the hall, or with other family members perhaps.

There is here again the issue of submission and headship, as has already been discussed in ch 11, and here is mentioned again in verse 34.....

A submission to each other out of reverence for Christ(Eph.5.21),. As JG already discussed in recent sermons.....

Now, lets turn to the issue of the use and misuse, within a church meeting, of the gift of speaking in tongues.

Look at verses 27 - 28 :

"If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret."

Let me tell you a story. Actually it's taken from when I was a teenager, maybe around 16 or so, but is typical of some similar events which happened during those years.

As a young Christian, some friends and I would often go to something called a 'Praise Rally'. This was, basically, a meeting of many Christians, from various denominations gathered together in a church-building on a Saturday night. There'd be musicians up front, a guest-speaker, an extended time of singing and invitation at the end for any who'd like prayer-ministry.

There's one particular meeting I remember because it took place in an Anglican church, but was lead by a team who weren't - Anglicans that is!

During the time of singing God's praises, at the end of a particularly beautiful and moving song, those at the front started singing a *different* tune and using words I couldn't understand. This seemed to give permission for *many others* in the congregation to also start singing in what I understood to be tongues. Somehow, the *notes* they sung were in harmony, but the *words* weren't. I think there were many of us who previously had been touched by the congregational singing of God's praises and who suddenly were left thinking '*er-what do I do now?*'

Many people had their arms raised and their eyes closed and they seemed to be in a sort of *ecstasy*. I and my friends felt a bit awkward and didn't know what we were supposed to do. Were we also supposed to close our eyes and sort of *pretend* to be in ecstasy too? Were we supposed to try to speak this unintelligible language or sit down and wait it out, or what?! There was no direction from the front, so we just stood there, looking at our feet and waited it out.

I remember that, after what seemed like ages somebody from within the main body spoke up in a loud clear voice and gave a message in English - it was a prophecy from God. Everybody else quietened down at that point and listened, and eventually we went on to sing another song, and the meeting came to order.

In my experience, this sort of occurrence in these sorts of meetings was fairly common, yet I never felt quite comfortable with it. In fact, it used to leave me feeling empty. I got a lot out of the **rest** of the meeting, but I didn't feel uplifted or helped or able to worship in those parts I mentioned.

What was happening there in that Praise Rally in that town in England was possibly similar to what was happening in Corinth; many people all speaking **unintelligible** sounds and all at the same time, no-one **interpreting** or stopping them and nothing there which was **building up the body** for God's glory. At least not in that particular part of the service.....

Let me remind you of v.16-17 which we read last Sunday -

*"If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do **not** understand say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified"*

The Gift of tongues sounds strange if you've not heard it before. Like a load of babbling gibberish which makes no sense whatsoever. It is best kept for private prayer and worship and is

particularly useful if you run out of English words with which to praise God! **So, if it is exercised within a public meeting there must be an interpretation.**

Other good uses for tongues which some Christians find is when **praying for somebody else** yet not really knowing what or how to pray. This may be when the person in need is actually there and they've come seeking help. Or it may be in ones' own quiet times when interceding for others. This also ties in with other gifts of the spirit such as **healing** and **words of knowledge** . The Spirit knows how we should pray and He knows what is the deepest desire and need of that person at that time. So in Romans (8.26) we read:

" In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray (for), but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

In Acts ch 2, we read about the day of Pentecost and that, after receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were given **many different languages** which enabled them to witness to all the different people-groups gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast, of the great things God had done. This was also the gift of tongues - not just tongues of fire either.

Many years ago I was at a tent meeting where, during a quiet part of the evening, a lady stood up and, in a loud clear voice spoke a message in a tongue given her by the Spirit. A few moments later, another stood up and gave a confident and clear 'interpretation' for the rest of us. What we didn't realise was that, amongst the many many people in that huge tent was one person from a small tribe in Africa. Unknown to the *original* speaker, the message had

been given in mother-tongue of that tribe and caused the African brother to turn to Christ!

It was an amazing gift and certainly astounded the lady who had, in obedience to God, given the message in the first place. Needless to say, when a few days later we were again meeting in that tent, and were told of this wondrous thing that had happened, the **whole body of people were uplifted and encouraged** and excited by the things of God.

Paul is saying that if a person has the gift of speaking in tongues, he/she ought also to pray for the gift of interpretation, of knowing what he/she has said in order that others can understand. Or someone else there should do so.....

The way the Corinthians were speaking in tongues was helping no-one because **believers** did not understand what was being said, and **unbelievers** thought the tongue-speakers were crazy. As in Acts 2, tongue-speaking was to be a sign to **unbelievers**, who could then have the 'words' interpreted for them, *thus giving credit to God*. The unbelievers could then be convinced of a spiritual reality, and motivated to look further into the Christian faith.

Lets look briefly at v29 and The use/misuse of Prophecy

Last week Jonathan spoke in some detail on the use of prophecy within the church, on what prophecy is and how God strengthens the church through prophecy, so I don't want to spend too long on this topic right now.

(if you missed last week's sermon and Prophetic message, you can find it on our website, or else get a friend to print it out for you).

I just want to emphasise that what Paul is saying about tongue-speaking, and about women talking, also applies to those who have *prophetic* messages for the church to hear, ie. it is all to be done for the building up of the church. And, as with tongue-speaking, there should be 'discrimination' or 'interpretation'.

So, v29 says : " two or three prophets should speak, and let the others weigh what is said "

In ch.12.10, Paul, in listing spiritual gifts, includes ' *distinguishing between spirits*'. Although not obvious in the *English* translation, the verb ' to distinguish' is the same in noun-form as the verb used in 14v29. In other words, here he is talking about **two** spiritual gifts, that of **prophecy** and that of **discriminating** or **distinguishing** between spirits - discerning whether a person who claims to speak for God is actually doing so, or is speaking by an evil spirit.

Similarly, the same can be said in relation to tongues- in 12.10 it is listed as a **gift**, with **interpretation** as a gift alongside it.

It makes sense then, in the light of the situation with which Paul is dealing in Corinth, that these gifts go hand-in-hand, for then order and building-up the church is possible.

APPLICATION :

Having read and re-read this passage over the past few weeks, I've been lead to ask many questions relating to our worship-life in the Anglican church, and specifically at St. Augustines.

The key verses in this passage are 26b, 33 and 40, and they tell us that everything done in a worship service must be beneficial to the worshippers, " **Let all things be done for building up**", says Paul - everything must be done in harmony and in order because God is a God **not** of *disorder* but of peace.

Now, in reading these passages, one of the first things that struck me, and maybe you too, was this :

Where, within the worshipping life at ST. Augustine's, do we have disorder and chaos?

We have a beautifully put-together liturgy Sunday by Sunday, and all the positive benefits of that, eg. Opportunity for -

- ✓ Praise in both spoken and sung forms
- ✓ Confession
- ✓ Knowing God's forgiveness
- ✓ Stating our belief
- ✓ Hearing God's Word, usually from both OT & NT
- ✓ Teaching & preaching
- ✓ Interceding for others
- ✓ Very importantly - sharing the Lord's supper together and all that means for us

It's all there! A well-thought-out, doctrinally-sound and beautiful 1.5 hrs on a Sunday morning - a rich feast!!

Speaking personally, by the end of the morning I usually feel uplifted, I've been able to worship God, I've learned something and I've received the spiritual nourishment which will send me out into the coming week to (please God) live and work to His praise and glory.

But this text from Paul, while not telling us what should be the content of our times of Worship together, begs questions; it raises issues for us that cannot, or should not, be avoided.

And, in coming to a conclusion, we need to consider some of these now. Questions for us all to ponder, not to answer now -

- Where is there the space to exercise some of these prophetic gifts about which we have been thinking?
- Where is there the opportunity for spontaneity?
- We hear the Word of God, yes, but do we allow Him to speak directly and personally and afresh to us this day?
- What might God be saying to us about our times of worship together?

We need to get out of our **comfort zone** - the **safety** of the liturgy in order to let our creative God create something afresh amongst us. I'm not saying lets leave the liturgy behind - I don't believe that is necessary at all. But we ought not to let it become an idol ! *Can we make room within our services for our creative God to be creative with us* - to encourage people to receive gifts of the HS and, where appropriate, speak out words from God?

For, as v.26 suggests, everybody has something to offer, whether one of these gifts or something else. *This is by no means an exhaustive list, and isn't meant to be.*

You may say, 'we are not Pentecostals - we are Anglicans', well, yes, but actually, we *are* Pentecostals too. Not by **name** maybe, but in **nature** we should be. When Jesus promised to send his H/S

it was on **ALL** people. At the beginning of Acts 1.8 Luke records Jesus' words

" But you will receive power when the HS comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth..... "

And the prophet Joel tells us (2.28-end)

*"And afterwards I will pour out my Spirit
on all people.
Your Sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions,
Even on my servants, both men and women
I will pour out my Spirit in those days....."*

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Well I've spoken for far too long already, but maybe this can be an ongoing conversation (a conversation Jonathan and I have - briefly - started) and together seek God - directed by His Holy Spirit - **what might He be saying to us at this time?**

We began by considering who it is we worship and who benefits from our times of worship together.....

Well, **we** benefit for sure, but might there be something **more** that God wants to do amongst us - a third dimension in our Christian lives, lead by the third person of the Trinity.....

For there is nothing of which to be afraid, if we 'follow the way of love' as Paul says in 14.1, and later in v. 33

" God is not a God of disorder but of peace"

Let us pray.