
Prayer and the Rock

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 23 August 2026

Romans 12:1-8 • Matthew 16:13-20



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We're going to speak today about gifts. Not gifts we give to each other, but the gifts or talents which we have and how we use them in service to others. We know that some of us are naturally good at music or public speaking; to others mathematics seems to come easily; some people are born leaders. These gifts are born in us, and can be developed further through study and experiences.

Then there are the gifts which Paul speaks about in our Romans passage. These are the gifts which come to us through the Holy Spirit. We receive these only if we follow Christ and let the Spirit dwell in us. Prophecy, ministry, teaching: these are gifts which God gives us for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are not to be bragged about, or used in vain; they are to be used in the Church, to build up the Church. Perhaps you started out life with some natural ability for singing, or speaking, or dancing. God will build on these gifts through your faith and the Spirit inside you. God will develop you once

you put your trust in him. We each have some gifts. The thing is to discover them among God's people and help each other to use them for the benefit of all.

That's a big reason why we have a service roster. It isn't just to make the vicar's job easier, although it certainly does! Yes, I could do all the readings, all the preaching, all the prayers, all the music — I could just be a one-man show. But if I did that, so much would be lost. Each reader, each person who prepares and leads prayers, each musician, each welcomer, brings something new and different out of their gifts. The Spirit enables us to do all these things to the best of our ability, and we are all richer because of it.

Empowering our people and making the most of their God-given gifts is one of the big drivers behind our new Mission Plan, which Vestry and the Parish approved recently. We talked a little about this at the parish meeting last month. The key idea is that we all have our gifts to offer, those we're born with, those we develop, those which God increases through the Spirit in us. We want to use these gifts to develop in three ways: in worship, in discipleship, and in engaging with our community. I'm just going to talk a little about the first one today: worship.

You all know how our services are structured. Whatever kind of service it is, it will have certain elements which are usually included: Bible readings, a sermon or talk of some kind, prayer, sometimes a creed, sometimes Communion. The regular Sunday service has all of these. We have some very good readers and some very good prayer-leaders, but we can always use more — not just to spread it out to reduce reliance on a small number of people, but because hearing different voices, for instance in the Bible readings, helps us all to understand the Bible and God better. God works through all his people. I often hear something new in even the most familiar reading when someone else reads it. Greater understanding leads to deeper faith and more opportunities for the Spirit to work in you. So if you volunteer to offer a reading, it is not for your own sake, but for the building up of the church — and of course the church is all of us here.

It is the same with leading the prayers. I have heard some beautiful prayers from our worship leaders. Prayer can be a very personal thing — just between you and God — but even when we pray with the whole congregation, that personal connection comes through. A congregation praying together is a very powerful thing. No two people will pray in exactly the same way, and likewise, no two prayer leaders will lead the prayers in exactly the same way. Our mission plan calls for us to put added emphasis on prayer, because it is through prayer that we will grow and develop our parish. I want to encourage those of you who have never read or never led prayers to consider it.

The time that we spend in worship on Sunday is not just a habit; our duty and our joy as Christians is to give glory to God, and we do that through prayer and singing hymns and other worship songs. I do commend Susan, Anna, Anne and Justine from St Mary's for starting the after-service prayer at that church. That is a step forward in increasing our commitment to being a parish of prayer. Do participate in this as you feel called to pray. I also ask for your help. What other ways can we expand and grow our prayer life? I don't usually do this kind of thing, but please just take a minute to turn to your immediate neighbour and discuss what we might do to grow the prayer life of our congregation.

Would anyone like to volunteer an idea?

I want to finish with a word about our Gospel. At this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has been travelling about with the disciples for some time, perhaps a year and a half or two years. He has come to earth with a mission to reveal the Gospel to his people. He knows that when he goes home to his Father, he will be leaving that mission in the hands of his disciples. He wonders if they will be ready. Are they getting the message? Are they learning what he needs them to learn? How do they see him by this time? So he asks them: "Who do people say that I am?" He is told that people see him as an important prophet, like Elijah, or John the Baptist. That is good, as far as it goes. But what about Peter and the others, who do they say he is? For the first time, Peter steps up to the mark: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Whew! He gets it. He understands. Well done Peter. If Peter gets it, and he's a bit slow sometimes to catch on, then Jesus can feel safe in the thought that Gospel will indeed spread after he gives up his mortal body. Peter will be the rock — and his name in Greek means rock — on which the church, all of us, will be built, for all the generations to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.