

Have you noticed how often other people will apologise to you for swearing or saying something they think we will disapprove of because we are Christians, or maybe we ourselves apologise to others and say 'Oh I shouldn't have said that!?' Christianity challenges people, or certainly should do so.

Jesus has always been a challenge to the world, and to governments who don't follow him. He was a threat during his time here on earth 2000 years ago, and he continues to be so now; and as we know in many countries to be a Christian still carries with it a potential death sentence.

Jesus' own disciples would themselves be put in mortal danger as they spread the gospel message throughout the eastern Mediterranean and further afield. Initially they may not have been so aware of the dangers that would lie ahead, but it was increasingly difficult to be associated with Jesus.

In our Gospel reading Jesus takes them away to a quieter part of the country, away from the prying eyes of the authorities, and engages with them about his mission. Who he really was, is still not fully understood, and indeed his divine connection with God the Father wouldn't be fully understood till after the Resurrection had taken place. Even Simon Peter may not have realized the full meaning of his statement that Jesus is the Christ or Messiah, the Son of God, in the way that we would understand that statement now. To him Jesus was divinely appointed to the role of Messiah, God's anointed king. That Jesus was in fact the second person of the Trinity would come later.

I really like Peter. He was so extrovert and impetuous, and made loads of mistakes like the rest of us, but he had such passion.

Jesus could see his qualities – the fact that he would be the ideal leader for the future church, or as the Theologian Tom Wright calls it- 'the community of forgiven sinners'.

The Jewish Temple was built upon a rock, Mount Zion. Now Simon Peter would be known as Peter, the rock, through whom Jesus would build the fledgling church.

The church would be powerful enough to overcome the realm of the dead, or Hades, and Peter would be given the keys to the Kingdom. Through the church people would gain access into that kingdom, as the Gospel message is proclaimed – starting with Peter on the day of Pentecost. God's plan of salvation would be

made known and Peter would have the responsibility of declaring innocence or guilt according to people's faith.

When we look at the passage from Paul's letter to the Romans we see how that fledgling church had developed, and there are lessons here for all of us. As we know Paul himself had previously persecuted members of the early church, but now he was one of Christ's greatest followers and established new churches in gentile communities.

The Holy Spirit is there – transforming people into God's holy people – those who no longer follow the ways of the world but who desire to only know and follow God's will instead. Of course we often fail, but God's grace and mercy is there – his loving forgiveness- to pick us up again, and again.

With Christ as the head, the Christian community is the body with each part working for the good of the whole church. There is no room for boasting, because our abilities are God given gifts. No one is better or worse than any other member of the body of Christ. We each have diverse gifts which work for the unity of the whole church.

It can be tempting to think that we lack certain gifts in our Parish, but no; they are there – ready to be put to use. We just need to look around and allow those gifts to be perceived and to flourish. Certainly during the current pandemic we soon discovered that we had far more technical knowhow than we could have envisaged a few months ago. That is one example.

When I read the passage from Romans I was struck by the repetition of the phrase 'let him' use this gift or that gift. Of course this doesn't mean that only men can exercise gifts! It can equally mean women. But just notice how often that phrase is used: 'if a man's gift is prophesying let him use it'; equally 'let him serve', 'let him teach', 'let him encourage', 'let him give generously', 'let him govern', and so on. We each have gifts of value and must use them, otherwise the body of Christ will be diminished.

So I would say – take heart. Each one of us has something to offer, and indeed many of these gifts are being used; and to those whose involvement has by necessity been curtailed, I would say you too are part of the church, you too have a gift of value; and remember one gift of great importance is that of intercessory prayer, so please continue to pray for the church both here and across the whole of this land, and beyond.

And may God's gracious gifts continue to grow and flourish amongst us all.  
Amen.