

Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

True spirituality

The statistic that someone quoted to me last week was shocking but hardly surprising – apparently now in the United Kingdom it is estimated that about 2% of the population attend church - about 1 million out of almost 60 million people. And probably most of those 1 million are elderly and will not be scattered in the pews that much longer. I imagine that the statistics are similar here in the Netherlands and they indicate the catastrophic decline in the Christian faith that is being experienced in this part of the world – though emphatically not elsewhere in places like China and in parts of Africa. When reflecting on this phenomenon it's often observed that people today in this neck of the woods are done with religion and with formal, organised faith. 'Organised religion' is out of favour. That, however, does not mean that they are not interested in 'spirituality'. The phrase that is often used by our contemporaries is that they are 'spiritual but not religious' and hence there is interest in things like yoga and what is known as 'mindfulness', and even in Buddhism, which is viewed as a less prescriptive and more flexible form of spiritual practice. And I suspect that this interest in spirituality over against religion reflects a fear that we might throw the baby out with the bath water, that in our rejection of religion we may fall prey to consumerism and materialism and some other pitfalls of modern life, and we may lose any contact with the depth and mystery of life to which religion, at its best, connects us.

So – spiritual but not religious is what many aspire to be and what got me thinking about this is that our reading from Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth this morning begins with a phrase that could be translated 'now, concerning spirituality.' Our version of the Bible translates it, 'Now, concerning spiritual gifts' but it would be as well rendered as 'concerning spiritual things' – or 'concerning spirituality'. For Paul 'spirituality' is life that is inspired and motivated by God's Holy Spirit and it's interesting to learn therefore from this passage what that looks like – what 'spirituality' understood as 'life in the Spirit' actually means. And the first thing that we notice is that Christian spirituality according to Paul begins with the confession that Jesus is

Lord. As Paul puts it: ‘no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit’. So spirituality for Paul begins with that confession.

Now this is interesting. People sometimes ask me what are the requirements for church membership – what you need to believe, and that’s an interesting question. Some churches have long, detailed confessions of faith which state precisely what people have to believe in order to become members. And what should that include? What do you have to sign up to? Well, it seems that that for Paul and for many early Christians the fundamental confession of faith that marked them out was ‘Jesus is Lord’, though there would have been some variation in what that actually meant. Did it mean that Jesus was divine, and in what sense? Well, Christians might have debated that, but to confess Jesus as Lord would certainly have meant that Jesus was the full and final authority over people’s lives, indeed for Paul that meant that he was the full and final authority over the whole universe, the entire cosmos, over everything in heaven and on earth.

Furthermore, that conviction that Jesus is Lord had both religious and political implications. It had religious implications for it meant that every other religious authority and power was debunked, and Paul in these verses mocks the idols of his day who, he claims, can’t even speak. Indeed this is why Christians were often regarded as atheists, for they renounced the gods of the ancient world. But of course the claim that Jesus was Lord had political implications too, for in the Roman world the basic confession that held society together was that Caesar is Lord, and Caesar was considered in divine terms. And that is why Christians got into trouble with the authorities, for the denial that Caesar was Lord was not only an offence to Caesar but it was also an undoing of the glue that held society together. It was deeply disruptive and subversive. Indeed, not only that but it was also utterly absurd – the idea that a Jewish peasant and preacher, executed in the most despised and shameful manner possible was Lord over all was not just offensive, it was laughable. Who were these Christians trying to kid? But, furthermore, it was that conviction that Jesus had been executed in a manner that was reserved for the lowest of the low, for slaves and subversives, that led to the Christian church being extraordinarily diverse and inclusive. One of the fascinating things about the church in Corinth was that it included people from all walks of life, from high-powered businessmen to the lowliest of slaves. Indeed the fact that it was so socially diverse led to problems which Paul has to address in his letters to

Corinth. But it was because Jesus was executed in such a despised way that the faith attracted people like slaves, people who were themselves despised and looked down upon and rejected. Belief in a crucified Lord made the church a society like no other where social rank and status were eliminated.

So that's the first feature of Christian spirituality according to Paul, the conviction that the crucified Jesus is Lord. That is the fundamental criterion for church membership and it is likely as offensive and laughable today as it was back in Paul's day. And it's likely to be considered far too narrow and prescriptive for today's spiritual-but -not-religious types. But for Paul it would be of the essence of Christian spirituality. And it's what turned the world upside down.

This brings us to the second feature of spirituality that we find here, namely that life in the Holy Spirit is a life in community. It's a life in which in God is disclosed in company with other people - and that can be hard. It's easy sometime to think 'give me Christ, just don't give me other Christians!' And of course one of the dominant features of our culture today is individualism. Today the individual is supreme and people safeguard their individuality and that is often reflected where spirituality becomes an individual affair - all about me and me becoming more complete as a person or me becoming more relaxed or more fulfilled or me becoming better able to cope with the stresses and strains of life. That is what much spirituality today is about - me and my needs and my development and my becoming more successful in this fraught and frenetic world. But for Paul Christian spiritual formation takes place in a community, and he introduces another factor into spirituality - the common good. Paul says in verse 7 of our reading, 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'. In other words spirituality is not just about my growth and development. It's about the growth and development of the church community to which I belong and to which I contribute.

So, think of this: last week we were thinking about Jesus' baptism and how a voice from heaven declared him to be the beloved in whom God delights. And we were thinking of how that is true for us too - we are the beloved of God, sealed in baptism with God's love and that can be a great strength to us. And all that is gloriously true and there is this individual dimension to spirituality - my relationship with God - but baptism is not all about me! Baptism is into a community and in baptism the Spirit comes to release in us gifts which will build up the community. And I love it that in our

reading from Isaiah this morning God describes Israel as his delight in whom he rejoices. ‘You shall be called My Delight Is In Her’ God says of Israel. In other words as well as rejoicing in Christ and delighting in each of us individually God also rejoices in the community of God’s people, and we are given the Holy Spirit for the common good, so that the church might indeed be a delight to God.

So Paul is telling the Corinthians that all of them, every single one of them has something to offer, to build up the church. You see, it seems that there was a bit of elitism going on in Corinth. Some people were exhibiting supernatural gifts – specifically they were speaking in tongues, ecstatic language that sometimes purported to convey heavenly messages from God. And people with that gift were engaging in spiritual one-upmanship, making out that they were superior to others. And I doubt it was the slaves and the servant-girls that were doing that. I suspect it was the big business men who needed to establish their superiority and rank. And Paul lays into the Corinthians and says no! Every single person has a spiritual gift for the common good of the community and he lists here the variety and diversity of ministries that are prompted by the Holy Spirit.

So also with us here. Our purpose here is to build up this community of faith. And in the next few weeks we will be inviting you to nominate a new elder to join the Consistory and that’s a vital leadership role. But it’s not just the elders and the minister who build up the life of this church. We all do it together. And there are children to teach, and there are teenagers to nurture, and there is coffee to serve, and there is washing up and hoovering to be done afterwards, and there are people to visit and people who need a word of encouragement or a shoulder to cry on, and there’s a choir to build us up in praise, and there is a ministry of prayer that needs tending, and there are visitors and newcomers to be welcomed and spoken to, and tourists to be guided, and there’s the ministry of just being here, just making ourselves available to one another for surely we are God’s gift to one another. And what’s it all for? It’s all for the common good, that the church of Jesus Christ, the people of God, might be built up and there might be a witness here in this corner of Amsterdam that brings joy to God’s heart.

This, then is true spirituality. True spirituality involves sharing common confession that Jesus is Lord, that crazy, absurd confession that was ridiculed in Paul’s day and that is increasingly ridiculed in ours. And true spirituality

involves diversity, releasing the variety of gifts and energies that God bestows upon all God's people and that are brought together and orchestrated for the common good. And so to God be the praise and the glory forever. Amen.

Prayers of intercession (by Maggie Richards):

O Lord, how manifold are your works, in wisdom you have made all things.

We bless and give you thanks for your innumerable gifts; of such diversity and uniqueness; artistic, scientific, creative gifts. The gifts of being able to listen, share, of loyalty, trustworthiness and many, many more.

We give thanks for gifts of education, wisdom and learning; the opportunities to develop and use our gifts, the discipline to work hard to achieve our goals; for providing us with professions and outlets to use our talents and to serve.

You provide for us, our families and for the needs of others through the use of our gifts and we are very grateful.

In your wisdom you've made us dependant on each other in trade, commerce, in the exchange of goods and services.

We give thanks for those you have chosen and inspired to assist in educating and helping in developing countries; for providing medical care and in the development of their skills so that they are enabled to provide for themselves, families and communities.

We especially give thanks for the work of the Mulanje Mission Hospital and for charitable organizations around the world as they give of their time and talents in service.

Father, we thank you for the enormous wealth of talents with which members, regular worshippers, and visitors to this church are blessed and for the willingness and

commitment of so many to service.

We give thanks for the members of Consistory and for the great contribution they make in the successful and smooth running of the church and pray for your guidance as we seek a new Elder.

We pray that you continue to bless Lance and that he be guided by your Holy Spirit to be a good Shepherd, nurturing, loving and guiding us to become your faithful children, in the knowledge and understanding of your word and in obedience.

We ask you to continue to bless his wife Sally and their family.

We give thanks for the many volunteers who give of their time and talents; for the Sunday School and Junior

School and the teachers and for the 20's and 30's group, men and ladies 'fellowship.

Bind us together in cords that cannot be broken and make us the body of Christ, working in your church, communities and in the world.

We thank and bless you for the greatest gift of all, your Son Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen