

Sermon by Father Roger Walker, St Botolph's Church Worthing
Second Sunday of Epiphany, John 2 v1-11, 1 Corinthians 12 v1-11

As we all know, Saint John loved to write symbolically in his gospel, and the miracle of changing water into wine symbolises the change with Jesus from Jewish worship - with its ritual ablutions with water - to Christian worship, centring on the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and the symbolism is reinforced by the words of the master of the banquet - who says of the water made wine, "you have kept the best until now" –and this best is not just a change in ways of worship but, as our reading from 1 Corinthians shows us -it is a best in terms of spiritual gifts from God and a whole new way of living – focusing not on keeping the law as the Jews did – but on living a life that honours God in a positive way-so let's have a look at these new spiritual gifts and see if they are present in our lives.

There are two things we need to remember about spiritual gifts. The first is that they are not ways of describing natural talents that we may have been born with or developed -they are specific gifts from God, given through his Holy Son. The second thing to remember is that we don't get all the gifts - God chooses what is best for us to receive so that we can work together with our fellow Christians for the common good. Note that St Paul writes: to one is given - to another is given. We have to ask ourselves: do we recognise what spiritual gifts God is giving us, and are we using them for the good of all?

We start with the gift of *wisdom*. This does not mean being clever, but rather acting according to the purposes of God-so on a universal scale the Bible sees it as being the wisdom of God in creation, and God's wisdom is also reflected in the way he brought about our redemption through his Son. Those to whom God gives spiritual wisdom are very aware of God as Creator and Redeemer and seek to reflect this in the way they live their lives and deal with others-those who choose Christian leaders are always looking for evidence of this spiritual, wide-ranging wisdom in them – and there is a difference between this and the wisdom we all need to make sensible decisions based on Jesus' teaching - let's pray that we all have the latter, deriving as it does from the divine wisdom. Then comes the spiritual gift of *knowledge* -this is not

something we have swotted up on and pushed into our brain ready for an exam-rather, it is the words that St John uses – that we may believe and know that Jesus is the god the source of external of life – we need this knowledge just as we need faith and *belief*, which is the next in our list of spiritual gifts - these are two gifts that God wants to give to all of us-they are the baseline for a Christian-that we believe, have *faith* in Jesus and know that he is our Saviour. So we must open our hearts to let the Holy Spirit strengthen these two gifts to us. Then comes a list of spiritual gifts: spiritual gifts that are certainly not for everyone, but which we can recognise clearly in some members of our Christian fellowship. First comes healing: we all know that there are some questions you have the gift of restoring the sick usually by prayer and the laying on of hands or anointing. Then come miraculous powers: rare, but not unknown when God wants something done. Followed by the gift of prophecy -something that is more common than we often realise – for prophecy does not mean the ability to foretell the future but rather to see clearly what God wants to happen in a particular situation and to tell others. Prophets are not popular in the church because they are usually asking for change, and we do like to stay the same. Strangely they are good at saying ‘this is what God wants’ but not good at putting the work in to make it happen. We do, however, need to listen to these individuals and pray to discern whether they are being given the gift of prophecy or are just being difficult. I suspect if you look back you can probably see how there was prophecy that led to St Botolph’s staying open. Next comes the ability to distinguish between spirits - that’s the discernment we were talking about - and a gift God will give freely to those who ask for it. Lastly come Tongues and the interpretation of Tongues. From time to time God uses the power of ecstatic prayer to his Church – but he always gives with it the gift of interpretation – so that against the ecstasy there are those who can say ‘this is what the strange words mean’, and St Paul does warn that if there is no one able to interpret, then those speaking in Tongues should be quiet within Church gatherings. All of this sounds quite theological, or in some cases unlikely, so which spiritual gifts should we be praying that God will give us? There are two that are essential in the Christian life - faith and knowledge – and two that will build up the life of our Church. Wisdom – even in its lesser form – and discernment –

knowing which of the competing voices is that which is the will and purpose of God. Pray for those four for yourselves. And if you sense within yourself any of the more unusual gifts, then ask God whether he really is giving you the spiritual gift and, if he is, how he wants you to use it. Everything changed with the coming of Jesus. He kept the best until now and in our lives we are called upon to reflect this new best, and to be aware that as Jesus changed the water into wine, so bit by bit he wants to change us – to increase the depth of our *faith* and *knowledge* by his spiritual gifts and at different times in our lives to give us other gifts that will enable us to play our part in building up his Church.

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

17.1.16