

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A.R. Cole

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost



7 October 2018

Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

In this Stewardship season we are thinking about our most precious things and how we use them in God's service. Today, I want to try to help us think about talents.

As I was writing this, I remembered a story about three boys in the schoolyard bragging about their talented fathers. The first boy says, "My Dad is an amazing writer, he scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a poem, they give him \$50." The second boy says, "That's nothing. My Dad is an amazing musician, he scribbles a few notes and words on a piece of paper, he calls it a song, they give him \$100." The third boy says, "I got you both beats. My Dad is a vicar, he scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a sermon. And it takes eight people to collect all the money!"

Woody Allen once said "Talent is luck. The important thing in life is courage." If you have ever seen the film or the play *Amadeus* which depicts the life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, you will also have heard of Antonio Salieri. Salieri gets a very bad press in this account by Peter Schaffer. He was a very successful composer and wrote operas in three languages, directing the Italian opera for the Hapsburg Court in Vienna from 1774 -1792.

The film *Amadeus* portrays him as bitterly jealous of the exasperating Mozart. What Salieri slaves' hours and days at, Mozart simply does effortlessly. There is a marvelous scene when Salieri is given some of Mozart's manuscripts to look at and is amazed and horrified to discover that there are almost no corrections on whole pieces of music. Mozart, it appears, just sat down and wrote whole works in a single almost immaculate draft. One feels for Salieri, even though the film portrays him as being sour and embittered and, the film suggests that he ends up poisoning Mozart out of envy and malice. It seems this was little more than a rumor in real life, but the study is a powerful one nonetheless.

We have all been, there haven't we? Watched someone effortlessly grasp and excel at something we have worked away at for years to become just modestly competent at. It is just not fair!

I remember a boy at school who just had it all. He was an effortlessly graceful and superb rugby player. He got straight A's in every exam. He was very good looking, and all the girls fawned on him. As if that was not enough, most unforgivably I thought, he was also an extremely nice chap! There was not a hint of arrogance or superiority in him. It's just not fair is it?

Talents and gifts are not distributed equally in this life. Nor are they earned. Of course, to become exceptional in sport or academics or in many aspects of life, the talented still have to work very hard to hone the gifts they have. No one gets a first-class degree or plays at the highest level in sport without hard work. No-one. Yet, it is undeniably true that, for most of us who are averagely gifted, no amount of work

will get us to the level that, those who are truly blessed with real talent at their birth, can achieve. The most unfair gift of all is good looks. The beautiful do nothing to be what they are in this respect, but it is unquestionably true that the beauty opens doors and creates opportunities in life. I am not talking about any impropriety here. That can happen of course, but even if it doesn't, the good looking have an undeniable advantage in life that is a powerful one indeed. Raw talent is luck, or we would say, God's particular blessing.

As we move further into our Stewardship season we might do well to reflect on our talents. If you look at the sermon I preached on September 23 online, and read the letter that I sent you last week, you will see that I have tried to express why Christians give and how we might approach the question of how much we should give. If you look at my Rector's Chronicle on the Website, you will see some reflection on 'time' as our most precious commodity in the eternal Stewardship equation. But what about talents?

Two pictures from the New Testament help us here I think. First there is St Paul's image of the body. The body is made up of very different parts with very different functions and abilities. The foot is perfect for walking but useless for seeing. The eye sees brilliantly, but you can't walk a step with an eye. Paul envisions the Christian Church, the body of Christ, as such a body. The message is that it doesn't matter if gifts are distributed unequally if the parts of the body act in unison. I didn't mind playing rugby with that boy at school, because playing with someone with his talent meant we all had a much better chance of winning. It is also true to say that, gifted as he was, he would not have been ever able to win a game on his own without the supporting cast of average and mediocre players like me to play alongside him.

My time in the services underlined this for me in two ways. There are many and diverse agencies in an Army. In peacetime, they all tend to disparage one another or at least to disregard each other. On exercises medics are just decoration because there are no real casualties. Military Police are despised because they spend their time arresting soldiers, and of course the Air Force are seen by soldiers as people who stay in hotels and occasionally fly overhead making a big show before returning a warm dry bed somewhere. On operations however, suddenly the equation changes. Medics are there saving lives, the Military Police are out on every patrol to collect evidence sharing the greatest risk along with the infantry, and the Air Force can save your life when the numbers are against you and they can deliver a devastating blow to the people that are trying to kill you. It suddenly all makes sense. The different parts of the body serve each other, and their different talents can all be crucial to the whole. Even the Padre becomes someone that Commanders see as essential parts to this diverse team. One this is also unavoidably obvious. The least talented, ill-educated and lowest ranked soldier is absolutely essential to the whole as well. As Woody Allen says, "Talent is luck. The most important thing in life is courage." That could have been written for those private soldiers who may never be rich or famous but who will save your life when the time comes.

The second picture is that of John the Baptist. He, in contrast is an isolated figure. He lives in the wilderness. He is wild himself. He is eccentric I suppose we might say. On the faces of it a little mad. And yet, he has a gift. He has a charisma. People are drawn to him. They flock to hear him speak. His words move them to the core of their beings. They believe him when he says they can be washed and made clean in their heart and souls. He is the forerunner, he prepares the ground for Christ. He inspires faith and he inspire fear, even in the powerful because he has a voice and people listen to him. Some people are given a gift, a talent for a particular purpose. Less to be part of the body than to be apart from it. Samson, in the Old Testament and his great strength is similar example. Sometimes our talents set us apart and make us able to do what no one else can do. Mozart, at least as he is portrayed in Amadeus, is such a man. In all other respects he is a fairly useless human being; a hopeless husband; an unreliable friend a very immature and, at times selfish and silly man. And yet, as Saliery laments, out of his mind comes unadulterated beauty

and wondrous music that has a nobility and depth that can possess and inspire the souls of men and women down the ages.

Sometimes, there is someone who seems like they can do nothing for the body, that seem to be, if anything a destructive or annoying presence. Yet, come the day and come the hour, it is they, and only they, that God can use to do what needs to be done.

Christ Church is full of gifts. Because we are where we are, most of our congregation have exceptional gifts. In every sphere, in politics and statecraft, in journalism and writing, in academic discipline and military service, in the law and medical professions and in a whole host of financial areas of expertise and many other areas, technical, scientific, artistic, business and intellectual.

Some were born with exceptional talent, some with exceptional resources, some with good looks and some with a charisma that just draws people to them. Many have also still had to work very hard to succeed but we all know that being dealt a strong hand of cards at birth makes success very much more possible. That said, many of us, are just reasonably good at some things and have found a niche here in the capital city where we can do OK. Here in Christ Church, in the body of Christ, all are needed for the body to be healthy and strong.

Some are generously using their professional skills to directly help the Church. Finance, Investments, legal matters, building works Some are using those skills indirectly. Being a good lawyer or Business person does not necessarily mean you will be a good Sunday school teacher, but if you are really good at one thing the chances are you can be good at another. I suspect we have some of the most highly qualified Sunday School teachers anywhere! The list is too long touch on everything. Today, all I would ask is that we all consider our talents, the blessings that we were born with and did not earn and ask ourselves what we can do to help the Church. Amen.



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