

## SERMON FOR THE 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

(Cape Town - 17 January 2010)

**Text:** <sup>4</sup> A body is made up of many parts, and each of them has its own use. <sup>5</sup> That's how it is with us. There are many of us, but we each are part of the body of Christ, as well as part of one another. <sup>6</sup> God has also given each of us different gifts to use. If we can prophesy, we should do it according to the amount of faith we have. <sup>7</sup> If we can serve others, we should serve. If we can teach, we should teach. <sup>8</sup> If we can encourage others, we should encourage them. If we can give, we should be generous. If we are leaders, we should do our best. If we are good to others, we should do it cheerfully. <sup>9</sup> Be sincere in your love for others. Hate everything that is evil and hold tight to everything that is good. <sup>10</sup> Love each other as brothers and sisters and honor others more than you do yourself. <sup>11</sup> Never give up. Eagerly follow the Holy Spirit and serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Let your hope make you glad. Be patient in time of trouble and never stop praying. <sup>13</sup> Take care of God's needy people and welcome strangers into your home. <sup>14</sup> Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them. <sup>15</sup> When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad. <sup>16</sup> Be friendly with everyone. Don't be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people. (Rom. 12: 4-16 - CEV)

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Italy, in the town of Cremona, lived a young boy named Antonio. Antonio was often sad. The town in which he lived was famous for its music, but he could neither sing or play. His voice was high and squeaky. And when he tried to play the violin, everybody asked him to stop.

Antonio was, however, quite desperate to become part of the music industry. It seemed, the only talent he had was whittling. Whittling is the art of carving shapes out of raw wood with a knife. One day Antonio heard that the famous violin maker Amati lived in Cremona. He visited him and begged him to serve as his apprentice. For many years they worked together. Antonio's love for whittling soon turned into a skill of carving. His hobby became his craft. Patiently he fashioned many violins, striving to make each one better and more beautiful than the one before.

When Antonio died in 1737, he left over 1500 violins, each one bearing a label that said "Antonio Stradivarius." Those in the music industry will know, these violins are today the most sought after violins in the world. The craftsmanship is simply brilliant. The tone crystal clear. Antonio Stradivarius could neither sing nor play, but his name placed the city of Cremona on the world map.

This story highlights that it isn't important how many and what talents we might have. Important is rather that we discover and use the talents given to us. That we all have at least one talent is emphasised by Paul. He writes to the Romans: ***“God has given each of us different gifts to use”*** (v.6). And then he names some of the gifts he saw in his congregation: teaching, serving, leadership, generosity, and many others. And then he

says (in my own words): “Use your gift to the glory of God and to the best of your ability!!”

Paul doesn't let any one of the hook just because we may think that we aren't as gifted as others. Nor does he allow us to think that a partial use of a gift, every other week or as we feel like it, would suffice.

It is important that we understand *Paul's reasoning*. In the early part of this letter to the Romans he spells out in great detail the wonderful things that God did for us in Jesus Christ. He tells us how we all sinned and all fall short of the glory of God. But in Christ God came and showed us unconditional grace.

God's grace gets him all excited. He tells us how we became one with Christ in his death and how God then resurrected us through baptism to a new life free from selfishness - governed by the Spirit of God. When he talks about God's love he gets even more excited. He tells us that nothing in this world or beyond, not even death, will ever be able to separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. We may experience hardships or trouble, but God's love towards us never wanes.

Then in chapter 11 Paul sums up everything by saying, "***How great are God's riches! How deep are his wisdom and knowledge! Who can explain his decisions? Who can understand his***

***erd. and*** ***gahar T..e T if T h T .i. .T II do gan T. . .T her T .***

As noted, God has given each one of us at least one talent. The point Paul is making is: Allow God to use you and your talent to fulfil his great plan for the church and the world. And because the church is made up of different people (and we all have different gifts), the variety in talents is just enormous.

I have been here in St Thomas for 7 years. By now you will know my talents, but you will also know my restrictions and limitations. But my limitations do not necessarily restrict the church. God put us together so that our strengths and weaknesses can compliment each other and mold us together into a harmonious whole.

Paul says: Just as the human body is made up of many parts, so also the church has many members. And each member is unique. It has a unique function to fulfil. This means that you have your God-given gift and you are part of St Thomas for a reason: There is a “gab” and God wants you to fill that gab.

Paul says: If you can serve others (if that is your gift), then serve. If you can teach, then teach. If you can encourage, then encourage! If you can lead, then lead (vv.6-9).

In most cases we have a pretty good idea what gifts God has given us. But every now and again we are surprised by what unused gifts God has given us. However, you will discover this unused gift in only one way - by stepping forward and just doing something.

Paul address young and old. There are no age restrictions here. Giving myself as a living sacrifice, being dedicated to God starts when I am small and it never stops.

That is the first point Paul makes: Serve God with undivided dedication with the gift he has given you..

The second point Paul addresses is the “way” we are to use our gifts. He captures it in one word, the word “Love”. What he says reminds us of the “Song of love” written by Paul to the Corinthians: ***“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing”*** (1 Cor.13:1-2).

Here he says: ***“Love must be sincere”*** (v.9). “Sincere” means I don’t “feign” love. “Good morning, I am so glad to see you”, but your heart is cold. Sincere love is the love

that comes out of a relationship that has been nurtured over a long time.

It is therefore also a love, as Paul writes, that ***“hates evil”*** and ***“holds tight to everything that is good”***. Today we don't always associate “hating evil” with love. For many people today “love” means tolerance: I allow everybody to do whatever they want to do. I am not even allowed to address what is clearly wrong. For Paul that isn't love. Sincere love is sometimes hard or “tough love”. And it is tough because it knows the destructiveness of evil.

Paul also speaks about “honouring” the other person more than ourselves. That we should bless those who mistreat and curse us. That we should be happy with those who are happy and sad with those who are sad. And that we should make friends with ordinary people. This is all LOVE.

One pastor has pointed out that the New Testament is full of "one-anothering." One-anothering promotes harmony, humility and respect. These are essential ingredients for a vibrant, growing fellowship of believers, held together by sincere love.

Important, however, is the “therefore”. We do all of this as a response to God's love. And we do so primarily as a service to Christ. If I love my brother, I serve Christ. If I make friends with somebody generally ignored by others, I serve Christ. If I comfort those who mourn, I serve Christ. If I use my leadership skills in the church, I serve Christ.

I pray that during this year 2010 we as a congregation will stand together more than ever before. And that each one of us (young and old) will use his or her gift in the service of Christ. Amen.