

Dear Friends,

It's that time of year again when we journey through Advent, to celebrate one of the events at the very heart of our faith, the coming of Christ into our world as the Word made flesh. Some of us will enjoy nativity plays, performed by both adults and children. I have often been quite emotional when watching children perform such presentations. Their little faces lit up in wonder and excitement. How would it be however, if the wise men turned up carrying a lamb and the shepherds open the door to the inn? Or the inn keeper decided to give out the gold frankincense and myrrh. This would lead to mayhem. Yes, it would but more importantly it would rob some characters of their role and not allow them to take their part. This is nonsense I hear you say and would never happen.

It does happen however, or at least something like it can happen in our churches. There are folk who have a particular role, task or responsibility, but other well-meaning people often just step in and take over someone else's role. Often with the best of intentions and believing that they are helping, when in fact they are stopping someone else from exercising their ministry. Not everyone is a preacher or wants to take part in leading worship, not everyone is a musician, and not everyone feels that they want to be on the leadership team. Therefore, we need to allow people to serve in the roles where they feel called and gifted. This is what St Paul is writing about in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, that the Church is the body of Christ and as such is made up of many parts.

I recall a young married woman who belonged to a certain church. Back in those days all the leadership team were men, but that was the way the world was and so she had no problem with that. Whenever there was an event at the church such as Harvest or the Church Anniversary it was the task of the leaders' wives to do the catering. Her own husband was a Church Steward and so this young woman was part of this catering team. It was her chance to serve and have a role within the life of the church, so she was more than pleased to do it. The wives would be asked to make



such things as mince pies, meat pies, shepherd's pies or apple pies, depending on the event. The pies were brought to the church and handed over to the kitchen team of ladies. However, event upon event, year after year; there were always pies left over. The pie that this young woman had made would always be one of these left-over pies. As is the case with most catering events, the number of pies needed had been over estimated, of course a practical thing to do, as one doesn't want to run out. Some of the other ladies however, believing that they were being extra helpful would make two pies. Adding to the over catering. It never made a difference as to how many pies were left over it was always this young woman's that was one of the leftover pies. Even if there was only one pie leftover, it would be hers. She would always end up taking her pie home. She considered whether her pie wasn't as good as the other older ladies, but it looked just as good. In fact, it looked better than some! When she tasted the other pies at the harvest supper or whatever the event, she knew that her pie was just as

good. She tried taking it to the church early, so that it would be the first one in the kitchen, and therefore the first to go into the oven. She tried taking it later. Whatever she did time after time never worked and her pie was left unused and therefore her ministry, she felt, was unwanted and even rejected. Sometimes she would even mention to the other ladies what was happening to her pies. She then found out that there was some ladies still making pies whose husbands were no longer on the leadership team, but because they had been in the past they carried on making pies and of course Mrs so and so, would always expect her pie to be used!

What happened in the end you may ask? Or you may not care! Well I will tell you anyway. After 10 years this young couple moved to a new house and therefore moved churches. What happened at the new church? Exactly the same thing! What happened in the end you may ask? Or you may not care! I will tell you anyway. After another 10 years, this woman stopped making pies, when off to theological college and became an ordained minister. Now I don't make pies for church events anymore. You may say that this story turned out for the best, so why tell it now. Well they are those in our churches who are pie makers, tea and coffee makers, welcomers, sound system operators, Local preachers, Worship Leaders, Church Stewards, Communion stewards and so on. Everyone needs to be able to exercise their ministry. Everyone needs to be allowed to serve God's church, without people stepping in taking over and cooking someone else's pie! What I am not talking about is the day to day help of lifting and shifting. If you see someone who looks like they may need assistance or help then please don't think that I am saying that you shouldn't help them that would be to take this message out of context and that would be silly. But before jumping in and taking over, someone else's role, just take a moment to stop and ask the person first if they want your help.

In the Christmas story, God identified himself irretrievably with humankind through the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Showing us that from the humble shepherd to the educated wise men we all have a role to play in serving Christ; let us all be willing to serve, but at the same time, let us allow space for others to serve and have their part to play too. This is the wonderful story of Christ, it is one of the things behind all the trivia with which society and at times we, have surrounded this festival with. We come so that the Christmas story may speak afresh to us, and our lives may be touched by Jesus in turn. Every blessing for Christmas and the New Year.

Pauline