

2019-01-27 ... 10am Sermon ... Revd Canon Judy Hunt

1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 31a; Luke 4: 14 – 21

‘Working as a Body’

Introduction ...

Collaborating with those who have different perspectives and priorities is by no means easy, as Brexit is making abundantly clear. There is no national consensus on the way forward. And in such times of anxiety and turmoil, people have a tendency to turn on those they consider ‘outsiders’. The government’s ‘hostile environment’ led to the Windrush scandal. Now EU citizens are fearful about their future in the UK. And at a funeral last Sunday for six unknown Auschwitz victims, the Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, warned of a rise in anti-Semitism, calling for all forms of racism and discrimination to be confronted. Especially poignant on this Sunday – which is Holocaust Memorial Day. All the more important therefore that our churches heed our reading from 1 Corinthians this morning, and act as places of openness and welcome, recognising the dignity and gifts of all.

(<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/99-january-february-2019-c/epiphany-3/postscript>).

An army, a vine, a flock of sheep ... all are Biblical images of what it means to be a group of Christians, a Christian community, a church.

Today we had another image in our reading from 1 Corinthians – to live and work as parts of members of the same body.

Perhaps because of my medical – veterinary – background this is one that has a great depth of meaning for me.

I’m going to speak about 3 things in particular this morning:

1. Valuing each part
2. Knowing our place or function
3. What is dangerous?

Valuing each part ...

Think back to a time when you’ve damaged your little finger – or perhaps hurt one of your toes ... until that point – you had (probably) no idea how much you used that finger or toe! And earlier on in medical science – it wasn’t until part of the body was removed – that we realised how critical it is to our wellbeing ... the pancreas and sugar levels, for example.

St Paul, in today’s epistle, uses obvious examples – the foot, the eye and so on ... but we need to think beyond the obvious too.

Everyone in this congregation is an integral part of the Body of Christ ... by your presence, your love, your listening, your prayer ... all the ‘non-obvious’ aspects ... PTO

as well as by the jobs you do, the tasks you undertake.

We won't all know, understand or realise exactly what part each and every other person plays ... but this passage expands on Jesus' teaching and actions of love and valuing each of us.

Then how about:

Knowing our place or function ...

This is a complex area ... because a 'body' is living, things change, we change. If as a 16 or 66 yr old you're still getting around as you did when 6 months old – there's a problem!

Think of an early embryo: the cells of that living being can develop into all the different kinds of tissue that the body needs ... cardiac muscle, nerves, liver cells and so on. And some individual Christians are like that – for some or all of their lives ... they can fulfil lots of different roles ... multifunctional.

Other Christians may be more akin to well-differentiated cells – perhaps a rod or cone in the eye ... needed for clarity of vision – but not able to then move the whole body in response to what is seen. The whole body needs the rod or cone cells, but needs more than those cells.

Yet other Christians may be more akin to an organ or system than a particular cell ... we could each go away and ponder which we're most like ... and how God can then use us:

The skin ... we protect others ... hold things together ...

The lungs ... we bring oxygen to others ... we support their lives ...

The liver ... we process what is going on ... we make things useful to other people ...

The kidneys ... we clear things up ... we stop rubbish accumulating, whether physical rubbish or things that clutter emotionally, physically, spiritually

... and so on.

The importance of knowing our place is two-fold:

Firstly – we'll be able to respond to God's call ...

we won't be the reason that the church isn't able to be healthy – because we'll be 'in place' and 'functioning properly'.

Secondly – we won't be stopping others from fulfilling their call ... yes a toe can be used to 'feel' ...

(next page)

but the fingers are usually much better equipped ... so the toe only needs to work in that way in the absence of fingers. Part of valuing each other is making space for each other ... but part of valuing the whole body means filling in the gaps. To move between those two understandings: making space and filling in gaps is not easy sometimes ... but is necessary if we're to respond to God's call as a church.

The same is true of overworking or under-working – both put a strain on the rest of the body.

Then the third main area for this morning:

What is dangerous?

What undermines the health of the body? Of the Christian church?

Lots of things could be mentioned but the one to highlight today is when the body starts to fight against itself: medically we might think of cancer – when one type of cell dominates; or some type of auto-immune disease – some types of arthritis ... when a form of self-destruction is going on. The church equivalents are obvious.

Danger when one person or one small group's opinion dominates unhelpfully or one aspect of church life grows to the detriment of others.

And danger when disagreements fester and damage our life together.

For this one look out for and come to our Lent course this year – sessions that aim to help us cope well and creatively with tensions and disagreements.

Conclusion ...

There are many other things that could be explored from this imagery given to us by St Paul ... but that's probably enough for one morning!

Let the image of this Church as the Body of Christ and yourself as a member stay with you. Pray about it ... Reflect on it ... so that we may all

Value ourselves and each part

Know our place – in a creative and developing way and

Avoid or deal with the dangers.

Amen.