

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole  
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany (C)  
Sunday, January 27, 2019

*Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 | Psalm 19*  
*1 Corinthians 12:12-31a | Luke 4:14-21*

This Sunday brings together a number of themes. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity ended last Friday, which was the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, and also, incidentally, the day on which some of us from the Celtic fringe remember the Scottish poet Robert Burns. We also remembered Martin Luther King last Monday with a holiday. His words about unity from the Lincoln Memorial still speak to us across the years to this day.

“This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

As we pray for the Unity of the Church, which, we do every week, in the ‘Prayer for Christ’s Church’ at the 8.00am Eucharist when we beseech God “to inspire continually the Universal Church with the spirit of truth, unity, and concord” we are also aware that we are very different.

I remember an old and very gruff sounding Bishop, Francis Moncreiff, who was Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. He was once invited to an Ecumenical service during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. He and the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland had been invited by the Roman Catholic Cardinal to great Concelebrated High Mass in the Roman Cathedral where the Cardinal was celebrating with about 50 bishops and priests. Primus Moncreiff and the Presbyterian Moderator were sitting on the sidelines of all this when it came to the peace and all the Roman priests started embracing and exchanging the kiss of peace. The Presbyterian Moderator then lent across to Primus Moncreiff and whispered. “What’s happening now?” To which the Primus replied - “I’m not quite sure. I think somebody’s just scored a goal!”

As an Army chaplain, I have served with priests and ministers from many, many different denominations. What was clear to me in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, was that the differences between us, while real and very profound, did not prevent us, there at least, from supporting each other and praying together. Perhaps it was partly the shared experience of being under threat, which of course we all were every day, particularly in moving around theatre. We came very close to losing chaplains many times actually. Where human beings share danger they are brought closer together of course.

Perhaps it was the fact that we were ministering to a largely secular group of people. Young men between the ages of 18 and 25 are the least formally religious group in society and the smaller numbers of young women serving in these places did not seem to be much more so. In such circumstances any Christian is a brother or a sister, even some of the Chaplains from across here who came from denominations I had never even heard of at the time.

Unity, it seems, is not about uniformity but about sharing a common purpose and an underlying deeper common identity that puts all the other tribal allegiances firmly in second place.

When you are a hurt or frightened soldier, you do not care which church the chaplain that is praying with you is from.

Today, in our Epistle reading we have the great and familiar words of the first great theologian of the Church, St Paul, the converted enemy of Christ, who became his greatest advocate and missionary apostle.

It is so familiar we tend to pass over it but it contains a truth that we must not pass over. A truth that speaks to every human situation, to divided families, dysfunctional governments, as well as to the Church. A body divided against itself destroys itself.

In it Paul imagines a body, like yours or mine. In our body there is an “I”, a mind, a personality. The parts of the body all listen for the “I”. The brain has been described as the biggest gland in the body. It communicates with and sends messages to every part via the central nervous system, consciously or unconsciously.

Unless the part of the body is connected to the brain, and the “I” that is you or me, then it is functioning on its own, and has no idea what it should be doing. It very soon begins to be out of sync and acting against the rest of the body. I knew a young woman once, whose immune system started attacking parts of her body for no apparent reason. She was near to death so many times it was almost a weekly event and it took the doctors months to work out what was causing it and how to treat it. When the body starts fighting within itself the outcomes are very bleak.

The “I” in Paul’s picture of the Church, is Christ. To be this body, we need to be connected, each of us, to him. What does that mean? It means listening hard for his voice and his will for us in prayer, in our reading of the Bible, in the voices of faithful people around us, in the world that God has made and in the depths of our own being and conscience.

This doesn’t mean we are going to come to the same conclusions about everything of course. Far from it. Some of the members of Christ’s body are Pro Life - some are Pro Choice, some pro wall some anti wall, some pro big government some pro small government, some pro gay marriage – some against. Some are high Church, some are low, some are theologically liberal, some conservative, a thousand differences, a thousand tribes.

But the key thing that unites the Christian Body, and makes it different from the rest of the world is that we are all, in our different views, appealing to the same authority, the same judge, the same head, the same Christ. This means that we must respect those who are doing the same. It also means that we all agree that there is something bigger than our positions, bigger than our politics or ethical conclusions. Crucially, even if we believe someone’s position is wrong we dare not call them evil, for they are part of the same body, connected (imperfectly no doubt, as our connection is imperfect) to the same “I”, the same Christ. It would be like the foot calling the hand evil.

The body is of course not perfect.

The Corinthian Church Paul is speaking to were not perfect. Far from it!

The church at Corinth was a mess. One commentator counts 15 distinguishable problems that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians: partisanship, the Corinthians factionalizing behind rival leaders; incest; prostitution; celibacy within marriage; Christians married to one another asking about divorce; Christians married to pagans asking about divorce; questions surrounding marriage and remarriage; lawsuits; idolatry; concerns about women praying and prophesying in immodest ways; chaos in worship, with speaking in tongues and competing voices; inequality in the communal meal; denials of the bodily resurrection of Jesus; arguments about the collection of a large sum of money to be sent to Jerusalem; and even a change in Paul's travel plans.

This glorious image of the Body of Christ is not a description of what the Church was like. It is Paul's very own "I have a dream speech" This is what it should be like, he is saying.

Three things, he implies, are necessary to understand.

First we need each other, despite of, and indeed because of our differences. If any member were to think for a moment that they were so important that they did not need the others they would be blind to the point of madness. Of course there must be leaders and people with important parts to play but the real strength of a community is in the great variety of gifts of its people. In a Church like this one, that strength is vast if we are able to bring all those gifts to bear.

Secondly we must respect each other. In the body there is no question of relative importances. If any limb or any organ ceases to function, the whole body is thrown out of gear. Anyone who has ever had a toothache knows how one tiny rotten tooth can make normal life impossible. Robert Burn's poem "A Man's a Man for a' that" is being read around the world this week. In it he states Paul's basic truth that the real worth of a person, or part of the body, rests not in their rank or position but in what they are like as a human being. He holds up a gold guinea coin and says "The rank is but the Guinea stamp, the man's the gold for a' that."

"For a' that an' a' that  
It's coming yet for a' that  
That Man to Man the world o'er  
Will brothers be for a' that."

Lastly we must sympathize with each other. If any one part of the body is affected, all the others suffer in sympathy because they cannot help it. The Church is a whole and where other Christians need that is our need also. It is good to have James Woody and David Shepard here this morning from Bishop Walkers School which is one of our main mission partners. We give a tenth of our income to support Christian projects like this as well as other organizations that support those in need near and far. The Body is much bigger than we are.

St Paul, like Martin Luther King, had a dream. A dream of what could be. We too have a dream here at Christ Church.

We express that dream each week here in this service. It is a dream of a unity that goes beyond division, beyond difference, beyond opinion, and our own faltering grasp of the truth. It is not that differences are irrelevant or unimportant, it is just that the culture of Christ makes them totally secondary.

Like the chaplains in Iraq and Afghanistan, what we have in common is so much more precious than the differences between us. Christ Church has a dream of a community that is united, not by politics or race or gender or sexuality or even by the great moral debates of our age, but by our desire to know Christ, to do what he would have us do and to be his body in this place and in the world.

It is the dream of a purpose-driven body that serves the poor and those in need, which makes a difference in the Church and in the communities we all engage with and work in.

It is the dream of a church that makes the light and life and grace of Christ visible to those who cannot yet see it. Believe it or not, in this bicentennial year, really an 18 month period, we have added 216 people to the Church's database, many of them young people. Not all are members yet. Not all are coming every week as yet, but they have been drawn into the life, teaching, worship, and orbit of this church, by our dream of what could be.

It is a dream of a church that cares for us. An affectionate community in which we have a spiritual home and in which all who attend a funeral or a wedding here, all who attend an evensong or a parish group, a session at the soup kitchen or even a party or a gathering where there are Christ Church people there; at any of these things, they catch a glimpse of a dream of a church that opens a door for others to find the precious home that we have found.

We dream of a church that is indeed a body. A body that is swimming in the sea of Christ's life and presence, swimming like a graceful athlete, every muscle and organ and sinew combining to move in the direction he leads us.

We are not that dream of course. Just as the Corinthians were not anything like Paul's dream for them.

We sort of understand that we need each other, but we are also all strong independent people who quietly believe that we don't really need more than our family, close friends and the security and life that we have made for ourselves.

We do try to respect each other, but there is always that part of ourselves that secretly believes that anyone who disagrees with us is either stupid, mad, or bad – or all three!

We do sympathize with each other, help one another and pray for one another when life strikes at one or other of us with some sickness or loss or accident, but we find it hard to care that much, especially for those we do not know.

We are not the dream, but we have the dream of what we could be. A dream we act out week by week in the beauty of the liturgy and in the bits of kindness, service, and the sacrifice of time and energy and substance that we give. In these things that dream grows and becomes, little by little, more true that it was.

And when we share the peace we do celebrate – not the scoring of a goal – but the knowledge that we need each other, that we respect the fellow member of Christ in each of us and we celebrate the care we have for each other in this growing and loving and healing body of Christ that is his Church in this place.