

*Body Politics*

I wonder what image comes into your mind when you think of the church. I wonder what picture that forms in your head. The New Testament provides us with a number of different images: sometimes the church is a building made up of living stones – that’s you and me – and sometimes it’s a vine, a luxuriant, fertile vine that bears fruit. And different images highlight different features of what is essential to the life of the church.

Well, this morning we come to a key image that Paul gives us. It’s the image of a body, made up of different limbs and organs and parts and all doing their bit to make the body work and to make it healthy. Before we begin to unpack it, however, I want to return to something that we were thinking about last week and that is that what unites Christians together in the church, what we hold in common as members of the church. And I was suggesting last week that it is the fundamental confession that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is the full and final authority over everything – that is what our faith is founded upon and it’s what unites us. And furthermore, that confession that Jesus is Lord is not quite what it immediately appears, for this Jesus who we proclaim as Lord was crucified. He was executed in the most shameful and despised manner imaginable – an execution that was reserved for slaves and for subversives, people who were deemed a threat to social order and to the status quo. Now, of course Christians believed that Jesus had risen from the dead, that he had been gloriously vindicated by God and was crowned as Lord of all. But it was still a Christ with wounds who ruled over all, a Christ who bore the marks of his despised and contemptible death.

Now, that meant that the church was a very odd community. You see a society is very much shaped by the kind of gods that it honours and reveres. What a society elevates and is devoted to profoundly shapes it. So, you could say that our society proclaims that mammon is Lord – and as a result we have a society obsessed with making money at all costs and where economics are everything and we suffer the consequences of that. But imagine if we believed that a clown was Lord. If a clown had ultimate authority and dominion over us then I guess that laughter and the absurd would be celebrated in that society. And if you believed that a musician was Lord then much would revolve around

music. Well, Paul believed that the world was ruled by a crucified Lord, and he believed that the church was called to bear witness to that, and in the early chapters of this 1<sup>st</sup> letter of his to the church in Corinth he has tried to think through the bizarre consequences of living under this regime of the crucified. And one thing that he is sure of is that this community has a special place for the despised and the excluded and the downtrodden. To live under the Lordship of one who had been rejected and outcast could only mean that a very special place was given to the mean and the lowly and the put-upon. So in the early chapters of this letter he exalts what he calls the foolishness of God in choosing those who are not wise or powerful in the eyes of the world to make up the church. Sadly, however, in Corinth things are reverting to type. Old habits are being reasserted and old pecking orders re-established. It's becoming business as usual in Corinth and so Paul writes these letters in protest.

Now, all that brings us back to Paul's image of the body with many members. And the interesting thing is that this image was not original to Paul. He didn't invent it, in fact it was commonplace in the ancient world to think of society as a body. But Paul gave it a particular twist – and this is crucial. In the ancient world the image of the body was used to keep people in their place. It was used to keep members of the lower, subordinate classes firmly in their stations in the social order. 'You are just a big toe, so know your place and don't even think of rising up against the head or the heart or the eyes'. Now, notice: in this use of the model different limbs and members are set over against each other. Their boundaries are strictly patrolled and 'inferior' members are conceived as a potential threat to the stability of the body. This body is held together by fear and suspicion and self-interest.

For Paul, however, with his crucified Lord, everything is different. For a start a crucified Lord bestows a special honour on the so-called 'inferior', lower orders. In the realm of a crucified Lord they have pride of place! But also with this crucified Lord the body is held together not by fear and suspicion and self-interest but by love, as Paul will expound in the next chapter. And therefore the limbs and members of the body are not set against one another – they are interdependent. They rely on one another. They are not in competition, they are in co-operation. And so in this model difference and diversity are seen not as a threat but in terms of mutual enrichment. And people here are not kept in their place but are encouraged to express themselves for the common good.

So the church in Corinth was a community made up of wealthy businessmen and also slaves and servant girls – hallelujah. But the wealthy businessmen have to realise that in the realm of the crucified Lord the slave and the servant girl have a special dignity and worth that they are denied when Caesar is Lord. And the wealthy businessmen have to realise that they need the slave and the servant girl and without them they are incomplete, for they bring something to the community that the community needs and that without them would be lacking.

Now this, sadly, is not the way the way the world works. Our way of handling diversity is different. Our way of handling diversity is to set differences over and against one another, and for what is deemed superior then to lord it over what is deemed inferior. We set things over and against, and over and above each other. So we have gender diversity – male and female. And we set them over against each other and then men lord it over women. And it's the same with racial diversity. We set Jew against Gentile or black against white and in Paul's day Jews considered themselves superior to Gentiles and throughout history Gentiles have persecuted Jews and of course whites have lorded it over blacks. And it's the same dynamic at work. And so also with class. We set up this power dynamic of superior over inferior – and Paul says, 'this is not how the body works!' And Paul's alternative vision comes to full clarity in that glorious declaration elsewhere that 'in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Geek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus!' Alleluia! Suddenly everything gets turned upside down and all the old power relations are blown away. The body works by interdependence, by co-operation. The eye needs the hand and the head needs to foot and they work together. And in the realm of the crucified Lord, special honour is given to baser parts.

This, then, is what it means to be the Body of Christ. You see, in this passage Paul does not just picture us as a body – any old body - but actually as the body of Christ. We are Jesus' body in the world. This is how the crucified Christ who is Lord of all takes shape in the world, through a people who live this way. Think of it this way. Think of that sublime beginning of John's Gospel which speaks of what we call the Incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth in Jesus of Nazareth. Well, what takes place in the church is a kind of second Incarnation as Jesus takes flesh amongst in this community and we become his hands and his feet. Christ

is present in the world through this community which proclaims him as Lord and who live in interdependence, recognising our need of those considered inferior and of lower status. And that's a community where everyone has a place, everyone has something to offer, everyone has some ministry - and where the world's evaluation of who is important and who isn't and who has status and who doesn't and who is in and who is out is radically reconfigured.

Recognise this, however. What takes shape here in the church however is not just for the church. These are not just house rules for this little club called the church. Not at all. This is how God wants the world to live. What we are called to model here in the church is the way of God's kingdom, God's realm: it's what life under the rule of Christ looks like, and all the world is Christ's. And it is in this sense that the church is a political body. What takes shape here amongst us is the way God wants the world to live. The way we are called to order life here should spill over into the politics and the dynamics and the power-relations that operate in the world.

So, think – what would the world look like if we envisaged ourselves as a body, made up of many parts, many tribes, many nations, many people, all wonderfully varied and diverse but deeply interdependent? What if we were to stop seeing ourselves as competitors for the world's riches and resources and to see ourselves instead as collaborators, working together for the common good of all? Is that feasible? And what if we were to take seriously the rule of the crucified Christ by giving special worth and status and dignity to the poor and the despised and the outcast and the downtrodden? How might we envisage the refugee, the asylum seeker? What might we learn from the disabled? What might we learn from the poor? How might we begin to treat the poor if we saw ourselves as interdependent, reliant on one another for the wellbeing of all?

What we need to see here is that in this 1<sup>st</sup> century letter of Paul to a small gathering of Christians in the ancient city of Corinth we are not just dealing with some local matters of contemporary irrelevance. We are dealing here with the politics of a church community, yes, but far more than that. We are dealing with the politics of Christ's kingdom which impinges upon the world and subverts and realigns the world's power dynamics. And what we learn here affects our politics and the way we view the world and the way we live and the way we treat people.

So let this vision, this vision of Christ's body begin here. Let it begin here, amongst us, in the Church. But let it extend from here out into the world

so that God's realm may draw near and the world may be reshaped and resound to God's glory. Amen.

O gracious God,  
we, you church, are the body of Jesus Christ  
and we praise you for diversity,  
for all the fullness of variety that is needed  
to do justice to the wonder and glory of who Christ is.  
Forgive us for our division.  
Forgive us for fracturing the Body of Jesus,  
and we pray today for the unity of God's people,  
that we may discover our interdependence  
and what we have to learn from one another  
and how we might be enriched by one another's traditions.  
Bless the churches here in this city,  
especially our neighbours here in the Begijnhof,  
and across the street on the Spui and on the Singel.  
Unite us we pray in the common cause of your Kingdom...  
And in this week of prayer for Christian Unity  
we pray for the spread of your Gospel,  
that in this secular world that honours other gods  
Jesus the crucified may be exalted.  
Give the church the courage to change in ways  
that will draw people to Jesus and not be a barrier  
and a stumbling block...  
Especially, teach us ways to reach out to those  
with least status and position in the eyes of the world...

And God as we pray for unity and reconciliation  
amongst your people, so we pray for the  
healing of the nations,  
for peace and reconciliation throughout the world.  
Again we pray for Syria and for those places under  
threat from Islamic State and from militants who  
would murder and destroy in God's name...  
As we pray for Christian Unity so we pray for unity  
and understanding between people of different faiths,  
that all religions may celebrate whatever truth  
they hold in common and may contribute to peace and  
reconciliation.  
We pray all these things in the name of Jesus who  
we confess as Saviour and Lord of all. Amen.