

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

20.1.19

### *The Body of Christ*

What on earth is the church for? Why, please tell me, are we here? Does it matter in the least that people who might call themselves Christians, attend church? Can't you be a perfectly good Christian without ever going near the place?

I expect on some Sunday mornings those might be questions that press on your mind as a particularly dull sermon or particularly dire hymns lead you to ponder, 'haven't I got better things to do?' And there are any number of reasons we might give for deciding that whatever we might think about God or Jesus, the church is a 'bad thing'. There are historical reasons, for a start. If we were to put the church and its behaviour throughout history on trial there are plenty of charges we could make against it – abuse of power, prejudice, oppression etc etc: we know all that. Is it any wonder that today, despite many people being wide open to what is loosely termed 'spirituality' there is widespread suspicion - if not downright hostility - to 'organised religion', by which they mean particularly 'the church'?

But if there are historical reasons for giving a thumbs-down to the church there are theological reasons too – or to put it differently, the church has done itself no favours by failing to articulate a clear theological reason for its own existence. It has written itself out of its own script and let me explain what I mean. When I do my Exploring the Faith Course, which I will soon be embarking on once more, I begin by going through the story that is told in the early chapters of the Bible. What the first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis describe, in story form, is a world that was created good but that has gone badly wrong. As you read through those chapters things just get worse and worse until they reach a decisive point in chapter 11. And having followed this account of the world's descent into violence and defiance of God I ask the question, 'so what does God do in response?' 'What does God do to remedy a world gone wrong?' And inevitably someone says, 'God sent Jesus to save us! He came to forgive us and to save us by his death and resurrection.' Now, it's hard to know where to begin to show how that is a complete travesty and distortion of the story that the Bible tells - but for our purposes this morning let's get this: that version of 'the Gospel' misses out a crucial part of that story.

Because, yes, God did indeed send Jesus to bring us salvation, but that is a long way down the line and a very long way from Genesis 11. God's immediate response to the mess described there is what? Well, it is to raise up a people, descendants of Abraham, who are called to live under God's rule, and who demonstrate to the world the liberating, humanising effect of living together as the people of God. God's response to a world gone wrong is to raise up a nation, a people, whose life exhibits to the world how we have been created to live. And that leads into the story of Israel – a not entirely happy story; and it eventually, a long way down the line takes us to one Israelite, Jesus; and from there it takes us to the Church, the new Israel. And if you want to follow that story, sign up for the Exploring the Faith course!

But all this also takes us to our reading from Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians from which we read his morning, because here is a community that is – or at least had been – fulfilling that calling of demonstrating to the world what life under God's rule is like. Corinth was probably a fairly typical Mediterranean seaport city of its day. In previous times it had been associated with sexual excess – sounds familiar – but in Paul's time it was probably fairly typical. It was a site of pagan worship, adorned with magnificent statues of gods and goddesses in public places, as with other cities in the Graeco-Roman world. But in the midst of this bustling city a community had been birthed through the labours of a man called Paul where something different was happening. Here, in a market place crowded with gods and deities, Jesus was proclaimed as Lord of them all. And because Jesus was proclaimed as Lord radical things were taking place in that church community, things that challenged the life of Corinth. For a start, in Corinth's stratified and hierarchical society where rich men sat at the top of the heap, here in the church a spectrum of different socio-economic classes, ranging from prosperous household heads to household slaves, all gathered together under the lordship of Jesus – men and women, rich and poor, slave and free – and together they found a new way of life that broke the mould of Corinth. And in that community people who were disempowered by society – women and slaves – were being empowered: as Paul writes, 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' In other words no-one here was dispensable or passive or marginalised as was common in the top-down civic life of Corinth: everyone – everyone – was discovering they had a contribution to the common good. That's church! Salvation is not a solo act: we

actually need one another in all our diversity and difference if we are to experience it and share in it! And so Paul goes on in this chapter to speak of the Body of Christ made up of many members: Christ existing as community and therefore salvation experienced in community.

The church, then, is central to the Gospel. The Body of Christ is key to God's strategy for bringing salvation to the world. So let's explore a little further why this is not always recognised. Partly there is a problem with the way religion is conceived. Archbishop William Temple once commented that 'religion is what you do with your solitude' and salvation is therefore often pictured in terms of me in my individual relationship to God, an understanding of religion that was furthered in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation. It's all about me and my God. But it's not. Salvation is about belonging to a community that embodies the reign and the rule of Christ and that offers a challenge to a world that, like Corinth, is in hock to other gods. But this individualistic turn fits well with our current highly individualised society.

Back in the year 2000 a political scientist named Robert Putnam wrote a book called 'Bowling Alone' which was basically about the collapse of community in the USA, but what he wrote applies beyond America and is still relevant today. Putnam talked about 'social capital', by which he meant the resources for improving society that reside in networks and gatherings of citizens: trade unions, churches, parent teacher associations, political parties, veterans associations etc. Now, all of these have seen a vast reduction in membership in recent times, indicating that people no longer want to belong together in this way. Putnam took bowling as his prime example – though the number of people bowling has increased in recent years, the number of people who bowl in leagues has decreased – they prefer bowling alone. Putnam blamed particularly the effect of television and the internet for this decline in social intercourse and community which once enriched society. And he has been criticised, inevitably, for underestimating other forms of community that have emerged through the IT revolution, especially social media. And that raises massive questions about the nature of community and indeed the future shape and form of the church. Will the future belong to 'virtual church', gathering together online and in chat rooms to worship and to Bible Study – as of course happens already? Can that be church? Is it compatible with being the Body of Christ in whom God has come in flesh and blood and touch? And you may sense my prejudice, but that discussion is for another occasion!

I want, however, to take further this idea of church as social capital, as a resource for input to society, for challenging wrongs and supporting the vulnerable. The night before last a group of about 10 of us from this church went to The Hague where we spent the early hours of Saturday morning offering up continual, seven hours of worship in a church there – part of an initiative that you may have read about, supporting a family who are threatened with deportation. As long as worship is being conducted in the church they have sanctuary and are safe and cannot be removed, so we were helping that along. Now whatever the rights and wrongs of the particular case, that is a good example of the church as social capital – a resource for input and influence for ‘the common good’. And ‘ordinary’ church members find they have gifts and energies to offer and they are not powerless as they might otherwise feel – and varieties of gifts emerge! And in the course of many years of ministry I have been blessed to be part of church communities that have mobilised in response to all kinds of pressing social issues: unemployment, young people at risk, addiction, homelessness, refugees and asylum seekers - these are the social issues of our day. And as ‘ordinary’ people we feel so powerless to do anything but as a church we are not, and with the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord on our lips and the Holy Spirit of God animating us, what resources we have at our disposal!

So I have sympathy with those who decry ‘organised religion’ and reject the church. They have good reason. But I only have so much sympathy. Thank God for the church with all its faults. I thank God for the social capital it offers and the way I’ve seen that used for good. I thank God that in a world of competing gods and lords I belong to a community that proclaims Christ as Lord. And I give thanks that salvation is not just about me and God but it’s about meeting God in people who are different from me and hold different views and different theologies and spiritualities from me. I thank God that in the great plan of salvation of the world the people of God, the holy nation, has a central, strategic place. And I thank God for calling me – and you - to be a member of it. Amen.

O holy God, blessed and eternal One,  
you summon the earth to a new day,  
you awaken the world to light and to life.  
And with that summons there comes the call to worship  
as earth joins with heaven in proclaiming that Jesus is Lord.

All things in their way bear witness to you;  
all things in their way proclaim your glory;  
all things in their way exalt your dear Son Jesus Christ.

But we, your creatures specially chosen for praise  
too often fail you;  
We, chosen to lead creation in its song and dance are  
too often silent and still, betrayers of our calling.  
And we, called into your church, the Body of Christ,  
Too often fail in our witness to the world.

O God, forgive our sins.  
Forgive us for all that dishonours you.  
Hear us as we confess to you our sins and failures...

Come, Holy Spirit, and reassure us once more that we are forgiven;  
Come, Holy Spirit, and lead our hearts and minds and bodies in  
worship;  
Come Holy Spirit and prompt our lips and our lives to proclaim that  
Jesus is Lord – in whose words we pray together, saying...

Loving God,  
in the midst of the world you have placed your church, the holy nation, called  
to live under your rule,  
called to live out the politics of your kingdom.  
We are the Body of Christ,  
made up of many members.  
Keep us faithful to that calling.  
May we be a place where all are welcomed,  
where all find expression for their gifts,  
where all are being changed into the likeness of Christ.  
Lord, in your mercy / *hear our prayer...*

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity  
we pray that the church worldwide would be one body,  
united in our diversity.  
We pray especially for the churches around us  
on the Spui and Singel:  
for the Lutherans, the Mennonites, the Roman Catholics,  
and for the Begijnhofkapel across our yard.  
We thank you for our fellowship together  
and we ask your blessing on their pastors and priests  
and all their members.  
May we together bear witness here to our Lord and Saviour.  
Lord, in your mercy / *hear our prayer...*

Loving God,  
Bless your world this morning:  
Once more we pray for the United Kingdom  
As it struggles for unity and consensus;  
once more we pray for the USA in its partial government shutdown;  
and we pray for Zimbabwe and the unrest there  
as it faces restrictions and shortages.  
Guide and direct our world leaders:  
Give them wisdom, and a yearning for right, justice and peace.  
Lord, in your mercy / *hear our prayer...*

And living God ,  
draw near we pray to all in special need this morning:  
we pray for the anxious and the troubled;  
those for whom the future is uncertain,  
those who are struggling with poverty or hardship,  
those whose faith is being tested.  
May they know the support of the community of believers,  
brothers and sisters in Christ  
and may they find strength and peace.  
Lord, in your mercy / *hear our prayer...*

And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ  
Our Lord and Saviour. Amen.