

SERMON EPIPHANY 3 27 January 2013

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Ps 19

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31

Luke 4: 14-21

May your word open us to truth and to grace, O God, our strength and our rock. Amen.

Barack Obama, in his inauguration speech delivered earlier this week, constantly used the word 'we', referring to the people of the United States. The phrase 'we, the people' also cropped up repeatedly through the speech. These were no mere rhetorical accidents. Obama, a master of speech craft, was reminding his listeners of their corporate identity as citizens of the United States, an identity which transcends their individuality. He also reminded them of their history and provided a conceptual bridge linking that history with the present and the future, encouraging a nation of rampant individualists to embrace national unity.

A very similar dynamic is at work in today's passage from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was a busy, cosmopolitan trading port, a Roman colony, barely a century old, built on the ruins of an ancient Greek city. At the crossroads of east and west, it brimmed with activity and was full of enterprising people from a wide range of backgrounds. Corinth was no quiet backwater. Rampant individuality and partisanship were the order of the day. We get a taste of this at the beginning of the Letter as St Paul takes the Corinthians to task for forming factions and for apparently valuing some gifts more highly than others.

In today's reading St Paul uses the powerful analogy of the Christian community as the body of Christ. He carefully explains that as members of the body of Christ, we are all different, one from another, just as arms, legs, eyes and ears are different from each other. We are uniquely ourselves, in our glorious diversity. And each one of us contains the imprint of God throughout our being, just as every part of our physical body carries our DNA. Each member is, however, dependent on the others and unable as an individual to reflect the nature of the whole.

And yet each member, as well as being an individual, is part of an organic whole, and that organic whole mirrors both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus in a way that the individual members do not. Inasmuch as the church does this, then it can be thought to participate in some measure in God. As community, as the body of Christ, we are drawn by Christ into the very heart of God.

This image of the church as the body of Christ links us, in our very human, very earthly selves, to Jesus, fully human, fully divine. With this image, St Paul has given us a conceptual tool which is readily accessible but which also

has great depth. It is intensely real and present. It speaks of our daily experience of being church together but it also contains the tantalising and challenging idea that this is a foretaste of divine community.

This image of the church as the body of Christ has beauty and power. It is a profoundly moving and helpful description of the community as a whole and of the way in which the component parts are linked in a symbiotic relationship.

However, it does carry some interpretive risks! A very literal reading of the metaphor could well lead you to think there is a hierarchy of importance based on relative beauty or usefulness of the various parts of the human body. Paul tries to guard against such a reading by stressing the interdependence of all the parts of the body and stating that 'the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable'. But how tempting it can be to see oneself as the heart, or at least a major organ, and your opponent as the appendix, or the little toe!

It is here, however, that the whole thrust of Jesus' teaching acts as a corrective. Time after time in the Gospel accounts, power and status are turned on their heads: overt institutional power is subverted, and the marginalised are acknowledged and cared for.

Today's Gospel reading is a case in point. Here is Jesus, in the synagogue at Nazareth, the town he grew up in, among the people who have known him all his life. But he does not take the politically safe option of reading the text for the day and saying 'thank you for inviting me'. Instead, he takes Isaiah's late 6th century BC proclamation of Israel's liberation from exile in Babylon and applies it to himself. 'Liberation is here!' he proclaims. It becomes his description of himself and his role. It is an awesome and shocking claim. By extension, it is also the role description, the mission statement of the church, his body in the world.

And that mission is one which reaches beyond the church itself and into the world of the broken-hearted, the outcast, the suffering. Jesus' ministry was radically inclusive – dining with tax collectors and prostitutes, touching lepers, healing the outcasts, chatting with a Samaritan (and a woman at that), collecting a motley band of disciples and challenging authority. God incarnate among us engaged passionately and compassionately with the world around.

But today we are the body of Christ in the world. In our times there is no shortage of need: both very local and further afield. As we see the depths of human suffering and alienation, this understanding of the church as the body of Christ calls us to respond to human need. This can feel completely overwhelming but the image of the body of Christ reminds us that we do not do this in isolation. We are part of a much larger enterprise. Together we can do things we simply cannot do alone, each offering our particular strengths for the good of all. It does not make much sense to be a Christian alone.

Admittedly, church can be deeply frustrating. Our very diversity can be an irritant. Life would be much simpler if we just hung around with like-minded people. In fact, there are times when life would be much simpler if we didn't need to interact with other people at all, if we could just get on with whatever it is that we do.

However, as humans beings made to be in relationship with each other and with God, and as followers of Christ, members of his body, the solitary life is not an option for most of us. We are called to engage with each other and with the world in which we live.

This weekend, swathed in green and gold, as we enjoy Australia Day celebrations, we cannot help but be reminded that we are part not just of the church but of a wider community. Today's readings remind us that we have a particular role within that community: to be Christ active in the world. Every generation must work out for itself what this means in their time and place.

Today, the ambiguity of Australia Day itself, a day of celebration for some, but a day of lament for those who experience it as the anniversary of the white invasion of their land, calls us to look clearly at the experience of those around us and to respond as Jesus would have responded, bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour.

We are here, at the beginning of the 3rd millennium since Jesus' birth, on the other side of the world from the place he spent his life, inspired and challenged by his teaching, by the gospel message of God's overwhelming love for all. It is a daunting task but we are not asked as individuals to be Christ, let alone saviours of the world. We are asked to be members of a body, a very particular body: the body of Christ; and to play our part – not more, not less. Amen.

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