

1 Corinthians 12 and Luke 4 – Epiphany 4 2016

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning everyone. I pray you have had a lovely week in spite of the changeable weather and the many coughs and colds that have been circulating. I hope that you have all been able to spend a moment or two this week focusing on God. I hope too that you have been blessed with those little glimpses of God's grace as you have been going about God's business in the world.

Our New Testament and Gospel reading today seem to both be tools for building up Christ's Body and offering us encouragement for living our Christian lives. How do we ensure that we remain in touch with God's grace? Where do we look to find strength in our faith? Both readings seem to hold important advice.

St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12 are particularly poignant as we think about what it means to be united in the body of Christ. As we read Paul's letter they instantly speak much common sense, and yet in our modern world, they are probably some of the most challenging.

When I was about 20, I found myself amongst a group of about 10 friends who became the core of my life. Every little piece of spare time, I found myself spending with them. We went to parties, up the pub, to football matches, all the stuff that such friends normally do. Tom and Tracy, two people at the centre of the group, began a relationship. For many months their relationship only seemed to gel the wider group together all the more. But then the inevitable happened. One day when we were all having a nice time, another member of our group, Gareth, began being rather unkind to a polish gentleman who had only recently arrived in the country, for no other reason than he was not British, not 'one of us'.

Now we need to be mindful of the backdrop in order to understand a little about what drove Gareth's emotions. We were living on a fenland town. The local economy was driven by agricultural farming and it was in the late 1990s when many Eastern

Europeans had begun moving into the area to work on the land. Gareth's family had been especially affected as his dad was a land worker who had found it difficult to find work as a result of wages being driven down by the influx of migrants.

Nonetheless, Gareth's actions were inappropriate and Tracey and I decided to confront Gareth and stick up for the Polish gentleman. Gareth, to his credit, immediately apologised for his actions and things soon cooled down. We all went home that evening assuming that all was forgotten.

As it turns out, however, that night Tracy and Tom fell out because Tom felt the need to defend Gareth's behaviour. They split up. Over the next few weeks different people began taking different sides and the explanation for the fall out began to be retold in more and more embellished ways. Everyone was damaged by the gossip and the body split. To our shame, however, instead of trying to mend the fall-out, we all decided to go our own separate ways; after all, the advice of most people was that it was better to walk away and start again than to waste precious energy trying to mend something that was already broken.

Society encourages us to dump things when they become a struggle! St Paul strongly challenges that approach.

Paul uses the metaphor of a human body to describe the Christian community. In talking about the Church, he has a concern for how such a diverse group of people can live together in a constructive fashion. In so doing he places the onus on each individual. He associates each member with a particular part of the body, considering each body-part's particular and unique function and how it contributes to the good of the whole body.

Just because we are an ear and not an eye, does not mean that we are any less a part of the body, just because we don't have the particular gift of sight. We simply have different gifts, gifts of hearing. To function to the best of its ability the body needs both hearing and sight and so as an ear, we are just as important to the wider body. Equally, if we are a foot we are just as valuable as a hand, our gifts are just used for a different

purpose. The metaphor can, of course, be followed through for every part of the body, no matter whether large or small, prominent or discreet.

The main point is, that in order for the body to function to its full potential every single part, small or great, needs to work according to its particular and unique function.

Pretty obvious and straightforward stuff. But Paul also tell us what happens when a particular part of the body wishes to deny its place or detach itself from the rest of the body. If an ear goes to such an extent as to physically remove itself from the rest of the body, it not only causes the body damage, it also causes the ear itself to be cut off from the very life source that feeds it, and eventually it withers and dies. A bit like cutting of one's nose to spite one's face, you might say.

Paul's purpose then is to highlight how each of us has an important part to play in the life of the Church community, Christ's Body on earth, and even if from time to time we feel dissatisfied or frustrated with the role that God is currently calling us to, to detach ourselves in response risks damaging both ourselves and the wider body.

Paul's argument seems to rest on two important principles of the Christian life:

- 1) That we need each other and we are better off working together than simply following our own passions.
- 2) That only together are we truly able to experience Christ working within us.

Paul says, "you are the true body of Christ and individually members of it". To be a Christian is to be a part of Christ's body.

As individuals we are called by the Spirit to individual roles in order to help the Christian community remain healthy and grow. This is why Paul goes on to talk a little about our life together. He offers a warning about dissention within the body and encourages each member to have a proper care for one another, stepping up in responsibility to ensure every member is properly cared for. Differences of opinion, he says, must not sever the body.

He outlines the truth we all know too well: "If one of us suffers, we all suffer. If one of us is honoured, we all rejoice!" In good times and bad we are bound together.

We all know how painful it is when we lose a member of our body, either by death, illness or people walking away. Just this week we have lost a special member of one of our congregations, Bill. Bill has become dear to many of us, and sadly died on Friday. Just a few months ago, we lost another life-long member, Burt, who had to be taken into care due to illness. Such things fill us all with sadness. And yet, what a privilege to be a part of a community who holds each other so dear.

The trouble is, sometimes our differences can divide us and it can seem all too difficult to persevere. The most obvious example of this, is of course, our far too many church denominations. Every split in the Church must make Jesus feel as though we are nailing him back to the cross, because it shows our failure to rejoice in what he wishes us to be. And yet the answer to overcoming our division is to be found in that very same Lord.

When we hear Jesus proclaiming in the synagogue that he is the fulfilment of Isaiah's words; the anointed one who sets us free no matter what our impingement, who brings the Good News, releasing the captives as he does so and freeing us from whatever oppression is keeping us down, Christ reveals to us the way life should be lived and affords us the opportunity to live as children of God. In Christ we become the sons and daughters of God.

There is no division in God. If we are to live up to our calling as his sons and daughters, we aspire to live according to the example he sets – and that is an example of unity. Where all parts work together to help goodness thrive.

Christ gives us the life-blood that enables us to be his people, and we have access to this life-giving force through his body on earth, the Church. As Paul says in a different passage: "by the one faith we were all baptised into the one body".

Just know that each of you are dearly loved: by God, by me and by all those sitting around you each Sunday. And we find the root of that love in Christ's life, which indwells us on account of our place within his body, the Church.

Amen.