

The Body of Christ ***Ephesians 4:1-16***

I still remember when our children were born. I, like most new parents I suppose, was fascinated by their perfectly formed miniature bodies: four fingers and a thumb on each hand; two ears; two eyes and so on. Even at this moment I am aware that a minor miracle is taking place: the ideas in my mind are promoting ideas in your minds through my lips and your ears.

Paul was clearly full of admiration for the human body. There are two occasions in which he refers to it, once in his first letter to the Corinthians and today in his letter to the Ephesians. What fascinates him is how its parts are so different and yet they all work together. This, for him is a picture of the Christian church. The church is full of many very different people, yet we all work together as one – or at least we do when we are functioning as we should.

But the body is not just a convenient image. We could in our own time liken ourselves not to a human body but to a mechanical object like a car – we could say that the church is a well-oiled machine. Or we could liken ourselves to an electronic device – the church is like a computer. But the church is not just a body – the church is *the* body, the Body of Christ.

Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish Christian put it like this:

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

What Christ did for thirty years in Palestine the church has been called to do throughout the world for two thousand years. It is important to note that in the teaching of St Paul we are not all individual Christs. It is not that a I am the Body of Christ, or you are the Body of Christ. It is the church which is the Body of Christ. And each one of us is an individual part of that Body. None of us has the fullness of Christ as individual; but as a whole we do. That is why the unity of the Body is so important. A body in which the arms acts independently of the eyes does not function as well as it should. A

church in which some members do not speak to each other is not the church that it is meant to be. It will not function properly: it will not serve the world. Paul is quite clear as to the qualities which foster this unity:

I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility, and gentleness, with patience, serving one another in love.

Eph 4:2

This is not the only occasion on which Paul has offered a list of essential Christian characteristics. To the Galatians he wrote:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control

Gal 5:22

We all need to measure ourselves against this standard. Each one of us needs to examine our own lives and ask: how far is my life characterized by humility, gentleness, patience and love? And if the answer is along the lines of 'Not enough' then we might need to reflect on how we change that situation. Fortunately we do not have to do it on our own. Just as there is one Body so there is one Spirit and the Holy Spirit who want to increase my humility, gentleness, patience and love always wants to increase your humility, gentleness, patience and love. The Holy Spirit is working in you and your neighbour to bring about mutual reconciliation.

Paul's understanding of the Body of Christ is that we are not all different in a random way. We are different in a complementary way. We are different in the way that a nose is different from an ear or a hand from a foot. They all have different roles and our differences are essential to the proper working of the church. Paul makes this quite explicit when he writes to the Corinthians:

If the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"

1 Cor 12:26

Paul does not go into this detail in his letter to the Ephesians but he does list the actual gifts, the ministries that he sees at work in the church:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11

It is worth reflecting on how these five ministries are expressed in the church of our own time.

Lets begin with apostles. Apostles are literally those who were sent out by Christ. As Christ was sent into the world by his Father so he himself sends out his apostles; and he sends them out with his authority. There is a sense in which the whole church is sent out and the whole church has the authority of Christ. But Paul writes that *some* are called to be apostles so he is clearly thinking of a ministry exercised by some and not all Christians. In fact the apostles were initially so few in number that they could be named and counted – there were twelve of them. And these twelve apostles passed on their ministry and their authority through the ordained ministry.

The prophetic ministry is harder to identify. Prophets speak from God and often in unexpected way. Prophets say new and challenging things. Prophets are likely to be on the edge of the church rather than at its heart. Often they speak words of encouragement; sometimes they speak words of warning.

Evangelists bring people to faith. The ministry of evangelism is often a very gentle one: it is often about forming effective relationships and slowly developing another person's faith until it blossoms.

A pastor is a carer – the word comes from the word for shepherd. A pastor pays particular attention to those who are at the edge of society – the poor, the sick, the foreigner.

And finally there is the teacher. We know that the pastoral ministry is very closely related to the teaching ministry because when Jesus saw a crowd that was 'like a sheep without a shepherd' (Matthew 9:36), he responded by teaching them. It is tempting to reduce teaching to the sharing of facts.

Facts have a place. It is difficult to be a Christian without knowing the facts of Jesus' life. But facts are not enough. We need to reflect on the facts and discerns what they imply for our own lives. What do the facts of Jesus' life mean for me? So teaching is about encouraging those skills of reflection to allow the Holy Spirit to speak.

These are the five gifts that Paul identifies to the Ephesians. But just as he has a another list of the fruits of the Spirit, so he, and St Peter, have other lists of gifts or ministries. And among them are some very down to earth ones like administration and hospitality. Those who count the money and make the tea are doing the work of Christ just as much those as those who lead, preach or teach.

I want to end by reflecting on how we each discover what our gifts are. The starting point is always to ask what is needed in the community around me and the church. Gifts and ministries are about service, building up the Body of Christ. A brilliant organist who finds himself in a congregation with six other brilliant organists might conclude either that he needs to find another congregation or that he needs to offer something else! But on the other hand, if your pastoral skills are poorly developed, but you find yourself in a congregation where they are in short supply, you might conclude that you need to go on a pastoral training course because being a pastor may be what you need to offer.

But although identifying gifts and ministries needs to begin with the needs around us, it is also about playing to our strengths and developing them. But how do we know what our strengths are? Perhaps because someone else tells us. Matthew, Peter, James and John did not volunteer to follow Jesus: he called them. 'Follow me' he said. They did not volunteer to go out and teach. Jesus sent them. The church often relies on volunteers. Perhaps we have got that wrong. We should operate not through volunteers but through those who are called. And that is a shared responsibility. We are all responsible for discerning what are the gifts in other people. One very obvious example of that way that when Gwen Southern decided to stand down as pianist she asked Tim to take her place. And we all need to follow her example. It is a great thing to volunteer to exercise a ministry in the church. It is a greater thing to call someone else to share it with and to train him or her to work alongside you.

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