

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 27 January 2019

Readings: 1 Corinthians 12 vv 12-31 and Luke 4 vv 14-21

If you have ever stubbed your toe or had a splinter in your little finger, you will know that pain in bodily extremities is excruciating and seems to be out of proportion to the importance of the part of the body concerned.

St Paul discusses human anatomy in the first reading today. 'The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable', he writes. As we know when we stub a toe, the pain is felt throughout the body and seems to alter our view of the world and life and everything in a flash.

Paul is writing to a fascinating community. Wealthy and gifted, cosmopolitan and educated, but riven with disagreement and division. Relationships are confused and strained almost to breaking point. There are struggles for power and competition, when there should be unity and a common focus on proclaiming Jesus as Lord.

This does no good, writes Paul. The whole body of the Church feels the acute pain. The whole body of the Church is damaged – and not just the Christians in Corinth. 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.'

It would be naïve and foolish to think that we will all see every issue in the same way. That does not respect our God-given humanity and individuality. There is nothing wrong with different views and characteristics – just as the different parts of the human body have different roles and functions. But there is damage when that spills over into struggles for power or hurtful comments.

Let me give you an example. Social media has transformed communication and, to an extent, transformed the world, especially for young people. There is much that is good about the way that connections can be made across communities and even with people whom we have not met in other parts of the world. But when it is misused, and bile and hate bursts from keyboards, it is destructive and dangerous. Disagreement and honest debate are fine. But stepping beyond that and writing things that one would never dream of saying face to face simply damages people and fails to respect their precious humanity.

One way of looking at the New Testament is to see it as the outworking of God's rescue plan for the failures of humanity, that can be traced back to the beginning of time, described in the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, in glorious and dramatic language and imagery as the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the flood which only Noah and his family survived.

We are coming towards the end of the season of Epiphany. Next Sunday is Candlemas, the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. We will put away the crib figures for another year, and return to the Sundays of ordinary time for a few weeks until Lent begins on Ash Wednesday.

Epiphany is about the announcement of God's rescue plan, about the launch of Jesus' ministry. Epiphany is about the revelation to a surprised world that God cares, that he cares enough to come amongst us in his Son, Jesus. That is why Paul is so frustrated by the self-centredness of the Corinthians who are more interested in sparring between

themselves than drawing the world to see the profound and transforming significance of Jesus - and to meet God face to face in him.

Epiphany is about experiencing God amongst us. It's about finding God, here and now. It's about the amazing fact that God is not 'out there', untouchable and unknowable. Yes, God's majesty is beyond our understanding - and God knows that. Which is why Jesus comes amongst us - Emmanuel, God with us. We meet God in the humanity of Jesus, existing remarkably along side his divinity. And through God's grace, we can meet him in the humanity of each other. And our squabbles and disagreements simply prevent us seeing the divine grace and touch in each other. Which, again, is why Paul is so frustrated by the Corinthians Christians.

I may disagree with some aspects of the style and emphasis of other Christian communities. But when I fail to see the spark of the Holy Spirit in them, I am diminished. 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.'

Today's Gospel reading offers us one of the most powerful statements that Jesus makes, which confirm, not as boasting but simply as a matter of fact, that God is with us.

Jesus stands up in the synagogue to read those powerful words from the prophecy of Isaiah. Then he sits down to teach them. All that Isaiah has foretold has happened - God's transformation is a possibility for the poor and the blind, the captives and the oppressed. 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' And that is not just true for those who were in the synagogue in Nazareth that memorable day. It is true for us. As we hear those same words from Isaiah, Jesus tells us that those words and all that they mean are fulfilled - in our hearing.

Paul speaks about the Body of Christ - that we need each other if the Church, the Body of Christ, is to be whole and healthy. Jesus speaks powerfully about the reconciling of hurts and differences, which are seen in a different perspective in the searing light of the resurrection.

We are baptised into Jesus' death and into his resurrection, and we belong to each other as well as to him - whether we like it or not. Of course, it takes a lifetime to work out what that means. But because God is with us, we are never alone - however much that may sometimes be how we feel because we do not find that loving embrace of the whole Body of Christ. We are called to live in the complexity of humanity and to seek to work for harmony - where the different lines and notes and instruments weave together to make a glorious sound and where discord is banished. We are called to be the Body of Christ - and to live in such a way that others can see exactly what Jesus proclaimed in Nazareth: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'