

One Body - Models of Ministry

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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In our epistle reading this morning, Paul shows the readers a way to understand the meaning of what it is to be the church. Describing the church as a body is more than just a catchy idea or good sermon illustration but portrays the very essence of what it means to be the kingdom of God here on earth. Sadly, I think that we have become so familiar with the expression the Body of Christ (after all we repeat it every communion service), that we have a tendency to ignore the implications of this simple thought. This morning, I would like to consider the implications if we are to take seriously this message of Paul.

I would like to begin by revisiting some old ground. The expression “worldview” is about how we view the world. We are, whether we like it or not, products of the world in which we have been brought up. How we understand ourselves and the world at large is a product of our environment and our experience. It is interesting in talking to people who have come from other cultures, how they may learn our language, but the fact that they grew up outside of our own culture means that they do not share the common cultural heritage such as the stories of Cinderella and Snow White. Culture is more than just language, but common experience as well. We found this when we went to Ghana. In and amongst the Akan people, there is a great tradition of Proverbs. What we found is that these proverbs were a sort of common currency and thus were never spoken in full. The hearer would always complete them in their own mind to get the meaning. It was not uncommon to hear someone say: “All fingers are not equal”. Now coming at this cold, what do you think it means? All fingers are not equal? Perhaps you might have thought that it is a corruption of the Orwellian phrase - All animals are created equal, but some are more equal than others? Maybe your mind leapt in different directions. It is in fact the abridging of the proverb: “All fingers are not equal, but all are equally useful”. In many ways, it is a summary of the epistle reading.

But it is not only the crossing to an African culture that is the problem. In New South Wales, where football is rugby league which has a totally different ethos than Aussie Rules or try asking for a can of cordial in Melbourne.... You see how we think is often culturally conditioned and one of the great challenges is to go beyond our own cultural conditioning to discover truth.

One of the great common experiences in our society is the education system. We all go through it in one way or another. Significantly, we do not often question the inherent values that underly the system. Our thinking in this area came with the age of enlightenment in the eighteenth century. This saw the pre-eminence of science and scientific method. Understanding things came from breaking things down into their component parts and understanding these parts, and therefore understanding the whole. Darwinian thinking was both the product and the motivating force of this movement. The world could be understood in hierarchical and evolutionary terms.

The ultimate example, being the master race theories of Hitler and the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s. This worldview in hierarchies culminates in empires, organisations etc.

This was not without its impact on the church, and much of the biblical scholarship in the last two centuries has centred around the disassembly of scripture into its component parts. This analysis and disassembly has helped us understand more about the nature of scripture and helped us with understanding of how to use and interpret it. But if we are to understand the bigger picture, it is no good just looking at the individual pieces of a jigsaw, the sense can only be seen in the assembled picture.

One of the difficulties of the past few decades, is that the old ways of thinking have slowly been challenged and new ways of thinking are arising. Science has lost its credibility and people seek more than just a logical explanation, but an experience and a mystery. This can be seen in the rise of not only the Pentecostal churches but also in the interest in the new age movement and the ancient nature religions.

Living in the changing period, is quite stressful, and we are often tempted to hang onto the way things are done, rather than to move on with change. This then leads to a division in our society between those wanting and embracing change and those who resist and reject it. This resulting division in society only adds to the strain and confusion. Thus, we find that we are living in a world in which the norm is polarisation and division.

For Christians, the problem is more than just a philosophical one. Our calling as God's people is tied up in principles of unity and stands in sharp contrast to world in which we find ourselves. We need to look beyond our own cultural experience, to the new culture of the Christian faith. Our starting point is about discovering the difference between the world as we have experienced and the world that Christ would have us live in.

This is the challenge of the world that Paul is describing here. In our world, we look at organisations and hierarchies, and we have tended to re-invent the church in that image. Paul says no -the church is the Body of Christ, an organism and not an organisation. For us to be true to this Pauline vision of the church, then there is a radical need to redefine ourselves. We need to establish what it is that we mean where we describe ourselves as a body. Paul is kind to us because he uses an illustration that can reach us all. Paul explains the nature of the church with an illustration that everyone can understand - the body, our body.

Now in doing this, we must resist the temptation to revert to old methods of analysis and disassembly. Our tendency is to then see the body as the description of the hierarchy. Our place is then measured by our distance from the head. This is quite at odds with the thinking of Paul.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free-- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

The word one is repeated five times in these two verses. As in Jesus prayer in John 17, the essence of the Christian faith is unity, oneness. In referring to the church as

the Body, Paul is not talking about structure, but relationship. He goes on to tell us - that the diversity of body is not that which separates us, but that which gives us a unity of purpose. Our individuality is not an excuse to divide. We cannot segregate ourselves from others who are different. Rather Paul says, the individual differences, are part of our expression of our faith. Indeed, those whom we see as least honourable need to be treated with special honour.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

How do we know that we are part of the Body - Paul is quite clear - If one member suffers, all suffer together with it;

Do you suffer when another member of the body suffers? More often than not the suffering is caused by the body itself? - We fail to perceive the others as part of the body and so we are quite prepared to inflict the pain. The essence of Paul's vision of the church is those so bound to each other that their separateness is overwhelmed by their unity.

Later in this service, we will say "We are the Body of Christ". Can we say this with integrity? Let us commit ourselves anew to each other that we may truly be the body and so challenge the world. **AMEN**