

## **Sermon for 26th Jan 2025, Year C, Epiphany 3**

**Preached at St Serf's Shettleston**

**1 Cor 12:12-31a**

### **Sermon**

Many people, when asked what part they play in the life of the Church, may struggle to say what their role is, or may look embarrassed, as if they suddenly feel that they have no purpose being here. And yet, if you ask anyone, adult or child, what part of a body they think best represents them, they are likely to have no problem telling you! Oh, I am a little finger, they will say, humbly. Or if they are a listener then perhaps they will identify as an ear. Someone who observes everything but rarely speaks might consider themselves an eye. The one who does practical tasks might consider themselves an arm or hand, and so on. Using the metaphor of ourselves as parts of a body also gives room for the hidden parts of the body to acknowledge their importance. The internal organs like liver, pancreas and kidneys, all do their work silently and are barely noticed, until they stop working, and then we realise how vital they are.

This is the meaning behind the community-as-body metaphor that Paul deploys in this chapter of his letter to the Corinthians that we heard a little earlier. This was not an uncommon metaphor by the way - Paul didn't invent it - but he definitely gave it a radical twist. Traditionally, when orators spoke of people being like parts of a body, what they wanted to emphasise was the hierarchy of roles in their society. 'Only we, the elites, are the head and the brain. We decide everything the body does, and everyone else needs to know their place. You hands and feet should just get on with doing the tasks we've give you and stop getting above your station.'

But Paul turns this on its head, if you'll pardon the pun. He uses the image to emphasise the importance of the seemingly less important parts of the body, calling on the so-called greater parts to give honour to the others.

His point is that you cannot separate parts of the body from each other. As we all know, if one part of the body is in pain, then the whole body is aware of it. While writing this sermon, I had a mild back ache, and you'd better believe that my back muscles were getting a lot more consideration and thought than they normally do! Suffering and honour are therefore collective experiences in the body of Christ. If one suffers, all suffer. If one is honoured, all are honoured.

This is why Paul argues that the idea of dissension within the body is so absurd. Why would the ear argue with the foot and say, 'I am more important than you,' or even, 'I have no need of you.'?

Long before modern businesses recognised the importance of diversity in their hiring practices, Paul is insisting that a body must possess and honour a diversity of body parts in order to be healthy and survive and flourish.

Of course, as we see around the world today, the view that diversity is a wicked and burdensome thing that should be expunged at every opportunity is taking back control of governments around the world. Bishop Budde in Washington cathedral last week preached to the congregation including President Trump about the importance of mercy and kindness towards the parts of the body who are 'undocumented migrants' but who nevertheless work incredibly hard at vital jobs collecting trash, working on farms, delivering food and so on. She reminded the president that Christ called on us to love even our enemies, and realise that those we despise can be the ones who have the skills to save us. Take the Good Samaritan for example. If this hated foreigner had been deported, who would have saved the man beaten and lying in a ditch, paying for the man's recovery out of his own pocket? This is why the least in society should be given the most

honour. As the famous radical leftist Jesus Christ said, 'the first shall be last, and the last first'.

But Trump declared Bishop Gene Robinson to be not smart and her service to be very boring. Well, it's clear to me which one of them is more gracious and Christlike, and I stand with my fellow Episcopalian.

What has ensued is a raging mob wishing and praying for the bishop to die, and declaring the Episcopal Church to be the epicentre of sin in the nation. It's become ever clearer that there are now two religions calling themselves Christianity in the world: one that sees so-called illegal migrants and LGBT people as sinners that God hates and wants to exclude from the nation so it can be great and holy again, and another that prioritises diversity, equity and inclusion, asks for mercy for those on the fringe of society and honours them the most.

There have always been those who want to turn Christianity into a religion of domination, control and power, where difference and diversity cannot be tolerated. They see the mote in others' eyes and righteously want to expel them from the body, but they are blind to the plank in their own eyes, despite Jesus's fervent warning against that very thing. Their rhetoric would be laughable if their actions weren't so terrifying. But they are sadly only the most visible manifestation of human selfishness that exists in all our hearts.

In writing to the Church in Corinth, Paul wasn't pleading with the Jewish religious leaders or the Roman emperor to stop their deadly persecutions - there was little hope of that - he was pleading with the people he himself had brought to faith, beloved parts of his own body, to stop arguing about who was most important, and who could be included, and who should be sent away, unwanted.

His point is not just that the most humble of members of our body have their use, but that God loves us whether we have any use or not. Too often, church

members have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that their value to God depends on what they can do, what gifts they have, and whether they are perfect in following their faith and so on. And then as we get older and can do less, we start to feel worthless and wonder if God loves us less now that we can barely get to church, let alone run the fundraising events or volunteer with a charity. But our relationships with God and each other have no purpose beyond themselves. Relationships don't depend on what we can do and offer, but are the visible expression of God's love, which takes delight simply being in the presence of its beloved. And we are God's beloved, both individually, and most importantly, together.

This letter from Paul tells us that every single person in a community matters, and not because of our gifts of health or wealth, or whether we were born here, but simply because we are part of this body, this community of those who yearn to be close to God in this place.

I wonder which part of the body you feel you might be in this Church community? Are you the heart? Or are you the little toenail? It doesn't matter. God loves us and that makes us all worthy. So don't be anxious, God loves the little toenail just as much as the heart and lungs, perhaps even more, since they are so humble. Our role is to accept that love, that God freely gives, and then see one another through God's eyes, as truly and unconditionally precious.