

Sermon – Rosie Coles – 23/1/22

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a and Luke 4.14-21

We've just listened to part of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Five years before he wrote these words, Paul spent some time in Corinth, and many people became Christians because of his ministry. After Paul other Christian missionaries visited Corinth, and now there were factions and divisions in the church because some people thought one preacher's message was better than another's, and this led to disagreements and splits, not unlike the way in which different denominations in this country came about – and still do.

The factions in the Corinthian church were made worse by the fact that the society was very hierarchical, the class system was large, and so even within the church not all believers were seen to be of equal worth. Your occupation, your place in society, determined your place within the church. Some really struggled to accept that people who were different from them were of equal value to God. Is there anything new under the sun?

And so St Paul's letter - and he reinforced his message with an illustration – the parts of the body...

I wonder what illustration you would use to get across the message that everyone is important in God's eyes, that everyone has their part to play in the work of God's people? It needs to be an everyday illustration that people can identify with...

How about mashed potato? Demonstration.....potato, peeler, knife, saucepan, jug of water, paper flames, potato masher, milk, butter.

But this would have been a meaningless image when people first came to worship in St Laurence's because no one in Scalby had ever seen a potato before 1590.....

I don't think this illustration would have worked for my father either – he probably ate mashed potato nearly every day of his life, but I don't think he ever prepared any himself.

So which illustration would you choose?

Paul's image of each part of the body being of value and importance is such a good illustration – it would make sense to the first people who ever walked on the earth, and it will continue to make sense for as long as there are people to hear it. When we feel pessimistic about the future of the church, when we wonder if the church as we know it will still be here in the future, perhaps we need to remind ourselves that scripture has been relevant for many many generations, and will continue to be so, and the spirit of God who moved over the waters of creation way back at the beginning of time, will continue to be present in the lives of God's people way into the future that we cannot know.

The parts of the body image works well for this week of prayer for Christian Unity, and yes, it is good when congregations of different denominations come together to worship in one another's buildings. But in my experience the real Christian unity happens at the grassroots level. When Christians live out their faith by working together in practical ways, friendships are formed, respect grows and we discover at a deeper level that we do indeed 'all share the same spirit', and our denominational differences become like a colourful background to living out our faith. In our own community, think of the Rainbow Centre, Westway Open Arms, Christian Aid, all the places where people of faith spend their working lives, the places and situations where the spirit of God is prompting, leading, blessing, encouraging, regardless of denomination..... and this is exciting.

We are still in the season of Christmas, when the gospel readings each week gradually build up a picture of who Jesus is... and today we have what some call the Nazareth Manifesto. Jesus went to the synagogue, he was handed the scroll of the book of Isaiah, he unrolled it, and read "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." And then he said, 'so this is me, these words are about me, this is who I am'.

The Nazareth manifesto was not about creating a successful church, or making people follow a particular creed, it was not about having a powerful place in society. It was about living and working together to bring life in all its fulness to the poor, the marginalised, the excluded. It was about following in Jesus' footsteps, knowing that although our fellow travellers might be quite different to us, we all share the same spirit.

But how are you and I going to set about working towards the enormous challenges of the Nazareth Manifesto, given that so many many people in our world are oppressed by poverty, injustice, ill health and inequality? What difference can you and I possibly make?

It was an ingenious idea when Christian Aid sent out these 12 days of Christmas impact calendars. The support you gave to Christian Aid last year, that drop in the ocean that made you think, will it really make any difference? Well, because of you and many like you, 3,324 families received practical help after the explosion in Beirut, 507,961 people in the Democratic Republic of Congo received enough cash to enable them to buy what they needed for survival. These things would not have happened without **your** contribution. In St Paul's words - All of us together are Christ's body, and each of us is a part of it.

Thirty years ago Roger and I had a foster daughter called Sheree who had cerebral palsy. Sheree enriched not just our lives, but the lives of many others too. She was very frail and couldn't do very much, but she could smile, she could squeal with delight. This was in the days when league tables published in the newspapers of how each school performed in GCSE's and A levels. The figures for Sheree's school were zero for all exams, no achievements whatsoever.

Sheree died when she was 8 and Roger chose this passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians to be read at her funeral. The 200 people in the church that day were a testament to a child who could apparently do very little, but in whom people, and we believe God, took great delight. As St Paul was urging Christians to understand and accept - in the economy of God, every person is of value.

I hope if you are ever tempted to feel overwhelmed by the sufferings of the world, or by the struggles to live a life of faith in a very secular society, you will remember that you too are a vital part of the body of Christ's church. You matter, and in the words of the prophet Zephaniah, God takes 'great delight in you' just as you are.

Thanks be to God. Amen