

St Brandon's 10:15am

23 January 2022

1 Cor 12 12-31a Luke 4: 14-21

The Body of Christ

The human body is probably the most amazing example of teamwork anywhere! Every part needs the other. When the stomach is hungry, the eyes spot the hamburger. The nose smells the onions, the feet run to the snack stand, the hands douse the burger with mustard and hove it back into the mouth, where the teeth get to work and it goes down to the stomach. Now that's cooperation!

Recent times have taken us to new levels in understanding the human body and its workings, sadly in far more serious contexts than that story. We've learned massively and rapidly through the COVID pandemic, reappraising our ability to control natural forces, and our propensity to undermine and unbalance them. We've appreciated afresh the complexity of human physiology, its resilience and fragility.

Marion Watson, of the Nuffield Institute where the Oxford Astra-Zeneca vaccine originated, is one of many scientists whose faith informs her work. In a recent interview she cited Ralph Waldo Emerson:

'All I have seen teaches me to trust the creator I have not seen.'

In our first reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul's choice of the human body as the central image to describe the people of God, is powerful and memorable. It's especially so at this time when the interconnections between public health and human flourishing, medicine and morality are so acutely relevant.

Throughout the Scriptures the people of God are seen as a city, a garden, a vineyard, an estate, a river, a flock but this body image is far more immediate and personal..

In the Old Testament, Ezekiel had a ghastly vision of dry, dead bones in an arid valley, then the Spirit of God breathes life into them and knits them together into new people, God's people.

Aware of this powerful prophecy, seeing its fulfilment in Jesus, Paul here focuses on **one body** with its various parts, into whom is breathed the Holy Spirit, the breath of life, from the head, Jesus Christ. In our translation the word 'members' is a helpful reminder that as parts of one body we are not robots but relational beings.

Unlike the robot cleaner which escaped from a Cambridge hotel this week and 'ran for its

life', ending up under a hedge, we are not mindless machines.

Paul drew that contrast at the start of chapter 12 which we read last week:

You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.

No, when we believe and trust in Christ, we become members of his body, the one body- we become more deeply related to God and one another, as his Spirit gives us life and unites us.

One body – a familiar phrase in our Communion liturgy, perhaps so familiar it's lost its impact.

One body: in this Week of Prayer for Christian unity, we have a special focus on this.

Last Thursday several of us joined for Evening Prayer with other Christians in the DH7 area – connected by Zoom and united by the Holy Spirit, members of Christ's body, worshipping in different locations and denominations.

Next Thursday we will gather as a deanery- Anglican churches in and around Durham, for an open meeting. We're also part of the regional body which is Durham diocese and of the national body, the Church of England. And as Anglicans we are privileged to be part of the Anglican Communion across the world, about which Richard Bartlett of USPG spoke to us in Advent.

One body, in this church, in our local area, deanery, diocese, worldwide Communion. When we follow Christ, he makes us members of one body, his church.

It is almost two years since we transformed, in just a few days, into Zoom church. We remember it well! And we might have expected this to be a divisive experience, but instead I believe we have become more united through all the changes of these last 22 months, because of God's Spirit uniting us.

Another reason is in today's passage:

God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

God has made us all **different**, and we need each other!

By his grace in March 2020 God gave us the technically competent who knew enough about IT to teach others, so we all learned how to connect in on Sundays and to become The new tech team who've navigated all the versions of zoom and livestreaming, hybrid and blended church ever since.

We knew we were blessed with musicians, yet God's Spirit inspired them to sing, play and

record every week so that we had our own hymns and songs of worship throughout, often accompanied by beautiful photos to inspire, comfort and unite us.

A little later, God grew among us the legendary Wipe Down Team, so that the beauty and stillness of this building could be available to all, every day. If we didn't know before that cleaners are vital to the church's life, we certainly do now.

I could go on...behind the scenes, quietly and graciously, with prayer and dedication and not a few risk assessments, the body of Christ was strengthened as all the members worked together for the common good. So many people were moved to generosity – in giving, time, energy, imagination, money, creativity, prayer, as the Holy Spirit inspired them. Thank you all, and praise God.

Just as some cells in a human body are replaced rapidly while others live a long time, parts of our church's life are new, while others continue. We remain recognisably St Brandon's, but we must continue to change and grow if we are to remain healthy.

So now, as we move forward from the last two years together, let us hold fast to what we've learned- lessons which Paul taught the church in Corinth so powerfully.

As members of one body we are different and interdependent – we need each other, respect and value each other.

Every member of St Brandon's has a unique place in the body of Christ and brings unique gifts, abilities and needs. Therefore, how we support and relate to each other is vital, as is the continual offering of time and energy so that all the body's functions work well.

I'm *not* going to make a plea this morning for new volunteers to make coffee, lead intercessions, serve on Deanery Synod, cater for Messy Church or join the PCC, though all and more are needed.

I *do* however urge you to take your reading sheet home and spend some more time this week with this powerful passage. As you do so, ask God to show you the part you play in his body here, now, whatever your role has or has not been in the past. Ask God how you can use your gifts and abilities as he guides, calls and inspires you, and please do talk to me, Alison, or others about it!

Thank you. Now let's pray:

Gracious and generous God,

You have given us gifts that make each of us special. Thank you that together, we have all

that is needed for the health and growth of your body the church, in your strength and through your grace.

May all we have seen- of your goodness and love among us, teach us to trust you, our creator for all we cannot yet see, today and in the future. We ask this through Jesus Christ, who is our head, our Lord and our Saviour. Amen