

**Epiphany 3C, 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2010**  
 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Luke 4:14-21  
 “*We belong to*”, or “*We Are*”?

There’s a comforting familiarity with our New Testament reading this morning. We all know this image – the church as the body of Christ; the church as an organic working whole. There’s even an attempt at humour from the usually serious Paul, as he has the body parts talking to each other. This image of “many members, one body” is timeless, simple and true, both from a physical body perspective and from how a church or group or organisation needs to work together.

But there’s a way in which we can be misled, or can deceive ourselves with this image. That word translated as “member” can get in the way of the radical impact these verses should have on our corporate and individual lives as Christians. In our twentieth/ twenty-first century living, where we are members of many groups, we can hear that word “member”, and without realising it, think of ourselves as being members of, or belonging to the church just as we belong to a club.

I want to tease out the challenge for us, so we can take hold of the radical claim of what Paul is saying. Think about the clubs or organisations you belong to or have belonged to– maybe Probus, maybe a service club like Rotary, or the Masons, or a sporting club; maybe you’re on a management committee of something. Think about what your membership of that group means. It’s likely there are rules to adhere to, codes of behaviour or even codes of dress, rituals of some sort or another; and there are personal and communal effects and outcomes of being part of that group, like how it does you and others good, like caring for each other.

Now think of yourself as being part of the Church. What’s different? This is the question the Apostle Paul was throwing at the Corinthian Church – they were not behaving as Christ’s precious body; they were beginning to behave like other groups in society, squabbling over who had the better gifts or held the more important functions.

These days, we might ask a church: are you a “church-like club” or a “club-like church”? Those two aren’t the same: one is more like the club we come to on Sunday mornings, just like we might go the gardening club on Thursdays; the other says something like us organising ourselves like a club, rather than being Christ’s living body in the world. I’d be very sad to hear either of those descriptions. Because it would mean that somewhere along the way, we as a corporate body – as the Body of Christ –just haven’t got it. We would somehow, somewhere, have missed out on taking hold of the identity with Christ and all believers that Paul is talking about in this passage; the identity that the whole of Jesus’ life and death and resurrections calls us into.

So, the question is begging: how do you identify yourself? Would you say: “I am a member of the Church of the Ascension”, or “I am an Anglican”, or “I am a Christian”? Years ago, in my twenties and thirties, after I began to take the Christian faith

seriously, I went through a progression of self-identification. At the start, I identified myself as a “born again, Spirit-filled Christian”; then I moved on into identifying myself –as did most Sydney Anglicans - as a “Christian who happens to attend an Anglican Church”; then came the BIG shift – I became an Anglican; lock, stock and Prayer Book. And I feel a communion with fellow Anglicans around the world.

But yet, my primary, and most fundamental identity, is that I am a Christian. I belong to Christ. Yes, I belong to his Church; yes, I belong to the Anglican Church. I am an Anglican –more than I’ve ever been. But first and foremost, I belong to Christ. I am a member – an organic part of his body. There’s a spiritual, physical and even meta-physical reality in that. His death on the cross was for all of us; his resurrection and gift of the transforming power of the Spirit is for all of us –that same Spirit in each of us, and among us as one body, one Church.

Being a member of the body of Christ means an absolute, out and out conjoining of one with the other, a sister or brother in Christ. It’s far beyond being a member of a club, or having a membership in a parish.

Listen to verse 13 of the Corinthians reading, this time in a different translation, from *The Message*. It packs a different punch than the words we’re used to:

*By means of Christ’s one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized [or when we confirmed our baptisms<sup>i</sup>].) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink.*

When we are baptised, we aren’t baptised as “Anglicans” or “Presbyterians” or whatever, as if we were gaining entry into this one group. We’re baptised into the whole Church of God. People are often surprised by that. We’re baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; we’re baptised into Christ, and that is our identity. And we are therefore joined with all others thus baptised –together with them, we become, we are, the body of Christ.

Rowan Williams suggests that this brings us into connection with “people we may be tempted to regard as contaminating, those who nearness makes us feel awkward.” And today the Apostle Paul tells us that we all need each other. There is no hierarchy of importance in Christ’s body.

And Paul really works that image further: as an organic inter-related whole, as a body, each of us cannot function in a complete way without the rest of the parts or members of the body; and as a body, what affects me has an effect on you. So he goes on with body part illustrations; and emphasised what that means in terms of how we need think about ourselves: reading from *The Message* again:

*As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.*

*What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own.*

*<sup>25-26</sup>The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.*

What does this mean on a practical level? Next week we'll hear Paul honing in on what matters most –love, and what it means to really love with the love of Christ.

But to finish – Paul's emphasis and his challenge:

First: we belong to Christ; his same one spirit is in us corporately as well as individually. If we consider our identity as a member of Ascension in the same way as being a member of any other club or group we belong to, then we haven't realised what it is to be a part of the very body of Christ. In this season of Epiphany –of revelation and coming to the light – let's ask God to reveal that to us; to really bring it home.

And secondly, what happens to any one member of his Body, here in this locality or anywhere in the world, in effect involves us, implicates us. We are drawn into others' sufferings, and we each have a responsibility to work for the health of the whole body. As the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the USA, Katharine Jefferts Schori reminded the church this week in response to the Haiti disaster: "I pray that we discover that we are so interconnected....Truly, when disaster strikes one of the least of us, it strikes all of us". It's with this that Paul's words join with today's Gospel message of the justice Jesus proclaims that he has been anointed to bring, which we now as Christ's body in the world proclaim and live.

And the fundamental challenge to us all: to affirm that we don't just *belong* to the Church, we don't just have membership in it, but we **are** the body of Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> The words in the square brackets are my own