

SERMON – 3 September 2017: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“ONE BODY, MANY PARTS”

1 Corinthians 1:12–31

27 Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.

I think many people would agree that a children’s talk is often more memorable than a sermon! I remember some children’s talk from many years agoalthough I do also remember some things I heard in sermons! The children’s talk often involves visual aids and practical demonstrations and pictures that aid memory in a way that a sermon doesn’t.

Last week’s talk was one of these. Robert showed the children a piece of A4 paper that was flimsy and not rigid or strong. He asked the children how the paper could be made stronger, how it could be made to hold weight. He then took lots of sheets of paper rolled into tubes and he put a bundle of them on the floor with a sheet of paper over the top and then more tubes and another sheet of paper.

He was then able to place a heavy bible on the top and it did not topple. In fact he told me later that he was able to put two bibles on top and it still held firm. He explained the physics involved in the strength of tubes even those made of paper. One on its own is weak, a group bundled together is strong.

He had drawn a person on each tube to represent the people in the church, drawing the analogy that people are weak individually but become much stronger when together. Each tube was important in the strength of the overall structure and each person is important in the power of the church.

I found myself thinking a lot about this at the beginning of the week and I turned to our passage for today. 1 Corinthians 12. We read verses 12 to 31 but the whole chapter is important in considering spiritual gifts and how everyone has gifts from God and a part (or parts) to play in the church.

Paul makes an analogy between the church and the body. He was probably drawing on the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato who had lived about 400 years BC. Plato drew the human body and portrayed the head as a city, the neck was like an isthmus or narrow stretch of land connecting the head to the torso, the heart was a fountain and the veins were canals and so on. Plato saw the body as an integrated whole and not the collection of parts. He wrote “We do not say my finger has a pain” but if we have a sore finger we say “I have a pain.” The personality, the “I” gives unity to the many parts.

What I is to the body in Plato's thinking, Christ is to the church in Paul's thinking. Christ is the head of the church, it is Christ who holds the church together.

Christ is no longer in the world, physically in the body and if he needs a task to be done, he needs someone to do it. We have to be his body on earth, carrying out the work of his kingdom.

This was beautifully put by Teresa of Avila, a 16th century mystic and Carmelite nun who said –

Christ has no body now but yours
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world
Christ has no body now but yours

Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world
Yours are the hands
Yours are the feet
Yours are the eyes
You are his body

The church at Corinth that Paul was writing to was forgetting who they were serving and why they were serving.

Proud and arrogant people wanted the public jobs, the jobs they considered most important, it was that or nothing, they didn't do the menial. Division was setting in. James said in his letter "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this : to look after orphans and widows in their distress" but Paul saw that the church at Corinth was neglecting its core duty and mission, to reach the marginalised and needy. These tasks weren't glamorous enough for some.

Humble people, on the other hand, thought they had nothing to offer and just sat back and observed.

So Paul spends some time in his letter describing various parts of the body, how each is important, how the loss of one small part will affect the whole and how the body is strong and functions best when every part is in place.

We can survive without some parts of our body but we might not function as effectively and there might be some things we cannot do. Interestingly the most vital and necessary parts of the body, the bits we cannot do without otherwise we cease to live, are hidden from sight – the brain, heart, liver, nervous system, blood, at least one lung. Maybe there is a good analogy there to the church, the importance of people who do things quietly and unseen and unrecognised, people who are vital to the work of the church.

In Paul's vision for the church there are three things he stresses.

We need to realise that we need each other. There is no such thing as isolation in the church. People should not be so engrossed in the bit of work that they do and feel that it is in any way superior to what someone else is doing. There should be no jealousy or desire to have the role of another unless that desire comes from God. If the church is to be a healthy body, we need the work that everyone can do.

Secondly, we ought to respect one another. There is no question of one person being more important than another. If a finger is lost from our hand that will affect how we function. Think of the pain when we stub our little toe, we can't think of anything until the pain subsides. The little toe might seem insignificant but it can take up our whole attention!

When we begin to think about our own importance in the Christian church then our Christian service is gone, we are serving our own pride and self-image and not serving the Lord and giving glory to God.

Thirdly, we ought to sympathise with each other. Paul says if one part suffers, every part suffers with it. Equally, if one part is honoured and rejoices then every part rejoices with it.

Mutual acceptance, mutual respect, sympathy with one another.

I wonder how our new minister will perceive us when he or she comes to join us here. People are exercising their gifts in many ways, some people are exercising new gifts, doing things they did not do before. The life of the church goes on. We should not anticipate the arrival of a new minister as a time to hand back lots of stuff to the minister to do.

There was a time when the minister controlled everything in the church, was involved in everything. But times have changed. Ministers are much more stretched because there are fewer of them. The minister needs a team of people around to help with the load. Never has it been so important in the church for people to step up and offer their skills and exercise their gifts, to be active parts of the body of Christ.

As I was thinking about these things mid-week, a magazine came in the post. It was a brand new magazine for ministers from church headquarters entitled Ascend. I was sceptical at first but was pleasantly surprised by some of the content. The aim is to support and develop ministers' skills in times of great change and stress for many.

One article in particular spoke directly into the issues of the church being one body with many parts. Rev Dr Mary Henderson is minister at Falkirk Laurieston Church

with Redding and Westquarter. She reflected on her 17 years of ministry and the growing pressures and expectations of the role of minister. She said that the pressures did not come from what are the core areas of ministry of Word and Sacrament – leading worship and pastoral care – but from the many other tasks and red tape and management and administration that need to be attended to. How many of these tasks could be shared by other parts of the body of Christ?

She wrote an interesting reflection and I want to share it with you. She describes what it is like to be a new minister, to be a long serving minister.

“Come to me” Jesus said **“and I will give you....**

Annual statistical returns and a PVG disclosure

A new e-mail address and rules about Data Protection

Targets and goals to set and a list of OSCR regulations

PAT testing and risk assessment to oversee

Presbytery committees to serve and reports to write

A Messy Church to run and a student to supervise

“Come to me” Jesus said **“and I will not be at all pleased if you haven’t”.....**

Organised a stewardship campaign and paid your Ministry and Mission in full

Agreed to become interim moderator in a vacancy that could last for years

Formed a worship team and a pastoral care team and equipped them to do all the things you feel you really should have done

Found a new treasurer to replace the one who just died

And a Sunday School teacher who will smooth things over after the last one left in a strop

Entered a hub ministry with your local colleagues and agreed to take on a congregation that has just been closed as well as your own

Persuaded your office bearers to adopt the unitary constitution

“Come to me” Jesus said, **“and I wont be angry so much as disappointed if you won’t”.....**

Embrace the new technology and use social media to the full

Organise your holiday cover and try to take a day off every week

Care for the old people and bring in the young ones

Engage with the local community and keep up a rich spiritual life yourself

Inspire your people and enable Tomorrow's Ministers to find their vocation

Become a locum as soon as you retire and don't make a fuss when you end up working five days instead of two (the congregation will love you for it).

"Come to me" Jesus said and I said

"Lord I'm tired and my back is breaking under this load."

"Come to me" Jesus said and I said

"Lord, if this is your yoke it is chafing my skin red raw

"Come to me" Jesus said, "and I will give you rest."

No-one in the church family should be tired with their backs breaking under the load, whether minister or elder or member. As parts of the body of Christ we are to look after each other in love. Paul said that to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good, for the good of all. God himself determines the works we will do and the gifts we will develop.

Let us build a house where love can dwell

Let us build a house where prophets speak

Let us build a house where all are welcome

AMEN