

Sermon on Sunday 26 January 2025 (Third Sunday of Epiphany) by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: Luke 4. 14-21 & 1 Corinthians 12. 12-31a



Do I matter? Seeking and working together

This week, the news has been saturated with The Donald. Not duck but, of course, the 47th President of the United States of America.

There has been a lot of triumph, division, hurt and anxiety. The talk is about what we will do and they don't want. You are either in power or out of power, a winner or a loser, and many people are left concerned about what will happen to them; even wondering whether they matter at all. They may lose their job, their land may be drilled, their birthright questioned.

I'm not just lambasting the condition of USA politics or offering a critique of the winning agenda. We look at the divisions in our own country between political parties and their supporters. And even the National Church and the Anglican Communion seem beset with the same issues. The question is whether this is an inevitable part of the human condition and so must be the chief characteristic of human living.

Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth in a state of great concern; the congregation had become so full of division and strife that it was taking them away from experiencing and sharing their faith. How could they focus on serving others and witnessing to God's love when they were consumed with internal matters of religious practice, who was doing what and with whom they agreed?

In the first half of this Chapter 12, Paul reminds the Corinthian congregation, and us today, that God is generous in giving many different gifts throughout the congregation for the service of all.

Look around you, we are not all the same - we don't look like each other, we don't live the same life, we don't have the same abilities and skills or gifts from God, yet we are all a part of the church.

When we seek and commit to the love of God and follow Jesus, we enjoy a relationship that transcends the one-to-one, it surpasses the relationships between those who are like us, think like us, worship like us; instead, all of us as different members live and move and have their being as part of a greater whole (12:12).

We are all one in Christ.

In the second half of Chapter 12, Paul explores the idea of being Church through the metaphor of the body: a human body contains many different parts but we are not divided, indeed all the parts work together.

Paul is saying that although not everyone has the same gifts, everyone has something given by God to bring to the service of God and God's children.

Just as the human body is made up of a range of parts (it would not do to just have ribs or ears), God calls people to come together who have all kinds of gifts: gifts of prayer, compassion, teaching, making music, being able to sit with others and listen, organising, bringing together, reaching out to those not yet met....

All parts matter equally.

A church full of leaders or prophets would be nothing without the rest. Every gift, every person, is needed to praise God, to love, to share and to heal through Jesus, God's son. We cannot say, none of us can say: "We don't need you".

Maybe this does not surprise you, but then Paul goes further:

Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. (12: 22-23)

I will leave you to imagine which parts of the human body Paul might have been thinking of as less honourable. But in the context of the metaphor of the body as church, we may be tempted to see others as less in some way - less noticeable, less to give, less important, not right in attitude, presentation, too vocal, or less 'religious', even less holy. If we are honest, we can all forget that everyone who comes to God is endowed with gifts to use.

Maybe you are someone who thinks, 'That's not me'. You could have just walked through the door [of this church] for the first time today or you have been here for years. Then let me say with absolute certainty, you as a person and what you have been given by God, what you have yet to discover and what you will be given is really of value to God, the church and society.

From a Faith perspective, we believe that the humble teach the proud, those in the slow lane can help the busy, the financially secure can be educated by those with not enough, the physically strong learn from the weak, those in times of good mental health can learn from listening to those who are struggling. And - above all - care, compassion, time and prayer can flow and be gifted to and from any quarter, any direction. Everyone contributes to the experience of being Church and to the Church's mission to spread the word of Jesus and new life.

Church is to welcome and include all kinds of people, all ages with many different experiences of life. We need to listen to each other and learn from each other.

This is how we are called to be Church and how we are called to live as human beings. It's not a theory or even a teaching. It's a practice and we are practising. Sometimes we all find it difficult and we will need to pray for God's forgiveness, for his grace and the inspiration of his spirit.

Human beings, in and out of the Church, will always have their differences and be tempted to divide, mistrust and cause strife, but asking Jesus to come into our hearts and be with us in our lives means that we need no longer despair about the human condition; our focus is how we can work with God, to - step by step - bring about his kingdom on earth as in heaven. This way, we can make a

difference realising that each of us, each and every one of us, is important to God.