

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

I'm sure at some stage in our lives, we've all visited those places which, for whatever reason, never quite matched up to our expectations. We had been told what a wonderful place it was - it's a must see. But when we actually get there, it all seems rather disappointing. I remember, for instance, the first time I went to New York City – the Big Apple, the 'city that never sleeps', they say; but in reality, I found rather grubby buildings, congested streets and *not* the friendliest of inhabitants either...Certain places can appear to be all glamorous from what people tell us about them, or from what we read on the holiday websites or see on TV, but sometimes when we actually visit those places for ourselves, they don't turn out quite what we expect - they fail to live up to expectations, as it were.

And the same is often sadly the case with the Church. People quite rightly have high expectations of what church should be like. But all too often, they

are disappointed. Billy Graham once remarked, 'If you've found a perfect church, don't join it: you'd spoil it'. And this is not something new. When we look at the background to our reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians – which I just want to briefly focus on today - we find that he *wasn't* writing to a perfect church - far from it. The church in Corinth was full of problems of all different kinds, and in his letter, we actually find Paul attempting to address some of the issues raised by these problems in the church. But even though the Church might often appear to be constantly failing to live up to its high calling, that doesn't mean that we should simply rest content with the way things are. That's Paul's challenge to the early Christians in Corinth and that's his challenge to *us* today. Because the Church – that is, *us* as the people of God in this place - should be striving to be what God wants us to be, so that we can *be* an effective witness to his Kingdom in the world.

So, the Apostle Paul outlines for us here something of what the Christian community should be like. First

of all, he talks of the way in which the Christian community should be characterized by 'unity in diversity'. He uses anatomical imagery to illustrate his point - namely, the image of the church as the 'Body of Christ'. In the same way that the human body is one, yet has many parts to it, so in the case of the Church, it's a unified whole which is made up of many different members. And so too our *own* church is made up of members from a variety of backgrounds. Yet whilst we must celebrate our differences, at the same time we must remember that we are all *one* in the Body of Christ. For we all enter into the Body - into the community of Christ - through the same sacrament of Baptism - "...in the *one* Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body...and we were all made to drink of *one* Spirit." And as our Communion Service reminds us each Sunday, 'Though we are *many*, we are *one* body, because we all share in *one* bread.'

I think we can sometimes get so used to being part of the Christian community that we lose sight of the radical nature of all this. Because, as Paul reminds

us, in the church - in Christ, people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds ("Jews or Greeks", as he puts it) and those of differing status in wider society ("slaves or free", as he puts it) are *all of equal value and importance*. When we realize just how fundamental the distinction between 'slave' and 'free' actually was in the Greek and Roman societies of the 1st century, we can begin to appreciate just how radical a statement Paul was making here. Because the Christian community was to be one in which those believers who were despised or cast aside by society at large, could find value and worth. And so today, I wonder if we ever stop to think about just what an extraordinary community the Church actually is. How many organizations or clubs we belong to actually bring together such a diverse group of people as the Church does? And yet in the midst of all that diversity, there is that unity - because we are *one* in Christ.

And then Paul continues to expound this theme of 'unity in diversity' in the church, as he draws on the image of the body. He simply points out that we

need one another. In the Christian community we all need each other in order for the community as a whole to be truly effective in its mission and witness. Now Paul warns us of two attitudes in the church which can all too easily stand in the way of this. On the one hand, there is that feeling amongst some people that they are simply not needed or that they are unimportant, or who even resent not having been made or gifted differently - ““Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body.....Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body...””; and on the other hand, an attitude of superiority on the part of some members towards others - “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’.” Both of these attitudes bring paralysis to the body as a whole, as it causes the body to be deprived of certain contributions, without which it will fall to pieces. The bottom line is, we *need* one another for the health of the body and to enable each person to operate at their full potential. And having just had the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we’re reminded, too, that this applies not only to the

individual church community, but even more widely to relationships between churches of different denominations. Just here in Worthing, we have Free Churches of various stripes, Salvationists, Roman Catholics, several independent churches; none of our denominations are self-sufficient in themselves. We really *need* one another and the particular insights and distinctive characteristics which each bring to the whole Body of Christ. We need the profound insights into Christian spirituality brought to us by Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy, we need the Methodist emphasis on fellowship and hospitality, we need the Pentecostal and Charismatic emphasis on the personal experience of the Holy Spirit... This doesn’t mean we’re going to agree on everything, but what unites us is far greater than our differences. We have much to learn from and receive from one another.

Then secondly, Paul notes that, in the Body of Christ, we differ from one another - “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of

smell be?" In other words, a body which is all ears or all eyes is not a body at all. And so in the Body of Christ, each member is unique, distinctive, irreplaceable and unrepeatable. We are to celebrate our different gifts, talents and skills, and to make use of these in the service of the body; each person makes their own distinctive and unique contribution to the whole, and yet at the same time, all are held together by God. God willing, we will be exploring some of this further in our Lent Course this year, entitled 'Living Christ', which links into our Diocese's Year of Vocation.

Thirdly, we are to *care* for one another. Mutual care and support is intrinsic to the Body of Christ. Members of a local church recognize their dependence upon one another, in particular, by paying attention to those "members of the body that seem to be weaker" - giving special care to those who might feel that they are not so important, but who are really vital to the health of the body. As Paul says, "...God has so arranged the body, giving the *greater* honour to the *inferior* member..." It turns the

thinking of the world 'upside down'. And this care finds its expression in the way in which members of the body are called to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. This profound sense of concern for one another is crucial to the integrity of the church's witness to the world. And it's important for us to remember how this also relates to our place within the *worldwide* Church. Today, millions of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world are suffering constant persecution at the hands of religious extremists or oppressive political regimes. Many are imprisoned simply for being followers of the Lord Jesus. Today, more Christians than ever before are being martyred for the Faith. But we're not to regard their suffering as somehow 'distant' from us - 'Oh, how awful - but what's it got to do with me?' Well it actually has everything to do with us, because if *one* part of the Body of Christ is suffering, then it's essential that the *whole* body feels that pain together. Their suffering *is* our suffering too.

And finally, the apostle reminds us of the

individuality of members of the Christian community - “Now you are the body of Christ, and *individually* members of it.” This isn’t about *individualism* (which is about leading one’s life one’s own way), but rather *individuality* - which in this case is essentially about each individual Christian growing as a believer whilst at the same time finding their place as a member of the wider Body of Christ. It’s about a sense of us belonging to the body and recognizing that we have a distinctive contribution to bring to the body; it’s about *each* believer finding their true value and worth in the Christian *community*. This is one of the reasons why the claim that I hear all too frequently from folk that ‘one can be a Christian without going to church’ is really false, because intrinsic to what it means to be a Christian is to be part of the whole Body of Christ - the Church, with a big ‘C’.

So, the Apostle Paul’s description of what the Christian community should be like is an extraordinary one indeed, and although we, like any other local church, are far from perfect, we’re nonetheless called to keep pressing on towards the

ideal. But in order to reach that goal, each and every one of us needs to play our part - for each of us have our distinctive contribution to make to the *whole* Body of Christ. In our Gospel reading this morning, the Lord Jesus goes to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth on the Sabbath, and he declares to those gathered there what his mission is to be – “...to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” And, in turn, Christ calls *us* today as his Church, his people, to share in that same mission to the world. As we grow more and more into that radical Christian community, so we will become increasingly effective witnesses for Christ in this place and beyond.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you call us to be part of your worldwide family, the Church, the Body of Christ. Help us each to recognise that we are a valued member of that community, and guide each of us to discern our unique contribution to it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.