

23<sup>rd</sup> January 2022

Preacher: Jen Smith

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Hymns:     116    **Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation**  
              762    **Our Father, who art in heaven**  
              693    **Beauty for brokenness**  
              706    **Longing for light, we wait in darkness**  
              676    **Christ, from whom all blessings flow**

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

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### **“Body of Christ”**

*Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

*Silence*

Friends we are in the midst of the octave of prayer for Christian unity – so it is appropriate that we ‘sit at the feet’ of Jesus – preaching here his first public sermon in Luke. And as we sit at his feet, we remember that much as we might esteem Sonia Hicks our President, or even John Wesley our wise uncle, **Jesus Christ is the head of our Church, of every church. His is the body that was broken, his is the Body we have become.**

Notice I've used an English saying, to ‘sit at his feet’, talking about Jesus - meaning that we sit in humility with Jesus to listen to him – lower than him. Feet are still a bit dodgy, the bottom bits that touch the ground – even in our colloquial speech, and even today, English language culture has built in a hierarchy of body parts – as do many cultures - otherwise you wouldn't understand what I meant saying ‘sit at his feet.’ Maybe Paul still has something to teach us, we who sometimes think we have so much more sorted out, think ourselves more progressive than those first Christian communities.

It would be entirely different for me to say we should listen to Jesus sitting ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with him, or ‘eye to eye’ with him, for instance. And of course, this is just what Jesus invites us to do. To rise from the dust and sit shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye as his companions. In John Wesley's words introducing the Covenant service, to ‘adventure with him.’ Let's be bold and do that today.

The first bit of Jesus' sermon was short and to the point and pleased everyone – especially, one might assume, those who were poor, or captive, or blind, oppressed – and all those allies who hoped for actual good things to happen right now to those sorts of people.

‘Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

But things are not going to stay pleasant – by the end of his time in the synagogue, that day, all who are there will be ‘enraged’ enough to pull him from the building and to the top of a cliff to throw him off – what could he have said? Well you are free to read ahead – but that is for next week – no spoilers.

And then we have Paul’s great sermon on the Body of Christ – one Body baptized in Christ. Preached to a divided church in Corinth that was having conflict not just about who sat where and who did what, and who could be counted a Christian and what they had to do or not do to be a Christian – and whose pain and suffering was more important.

The way of the world says for one to be up, another must come down. Power is a zero sum game, and in a community of people, even a church, if a foot is to get more esteem, then the eyes and ears are going to be taken down a peg. In church, the world says, like everywhere else, it’s a struggle for power. It is not so, friends.

And yet, often the way things go, someone might say nice things about ‘levelling up’ good people try then to do things that raise everyone up – but in the end, that usually means someone else is coming down. And then in anticipation of losing out, all of us who have ever known what it was like to be down in the dust fight one another for scraps – and so we guard influence and resources, and we are jealous for power, and try to anticipate where the threats will come from to our freedom, our future.

That about sums up the church in Corinth, I think. It’s why Paul was writing – to say there is a more excellent way. Not ‘you can be nicer,’ or ‘there’s some clever happy medium so everyone can have what they want, but ‘Because it is Jesus’ body we have become, you can dare to stop fighting and listen to one another, care for one another, feel one another’s suffering and joy.’ You are one.

It’s my guess that the church in Corinth thought the best they could have was a victory for one side over another – Paul was trying to give them a more excellent way. I think he is still trying to give it to us.

And notice, Paul didn’t say ‘you can, or you should work hard to be one Body because that would be nice.’ He said ‘you ARE one body – so it is.’ He wasn’t asking us to make an ethical choice or TRY to be one Body, or say ‘it would be nice if you were,’ he was declaring a truth about our very being – as immutable as the creation we sang of in the Psalm. Already.

**We who have been touched by grace do not have to fight in the dust for scraps. We can do something different because we are Christ’s Body. But Paul’s more excellent way is not just about valuing different gifts so we all get along and live happily ever after.**

Let’s bring this down to earth. a few years ago I had a spectacularly bad car trip with a friend. We were travelling from Leicester to a little village in Surrey. Down the M1 to the M25, and around to the right – easy, you’d think. I was navigating, and she was driving – it was her car.

(I’d like to add at this point that she is STILL my friend.)

We started well: we were polite, negotiated the joint purchase of a bag of sweets. Things got a little tense when our differences began to show over choice of music – but, we compromised, ending up with something we neither of us really liked but could both bear. And I was giving driving directions and she was following them.

The thing was, I really thought my directions were right. And the other thing was that she really thought my directions were right too. Until it became clear to both of us to be fair at different times, that I wasn't right.

About three hours later, out of sweets and passing the same sign for Dover a second time, we came to one of those universal moments in community living where the gap between where you want to go and where you are, becomes too noticeable to ignore. We were both suffering. But our suffering, though being done at the same time, was not shared. She drove with gritted teeth ready to throw me from a window. I was, perversely, also fuming – internally justifying myself. Even convincing myself it had been the map that was wrong, or the signs. Or her.

Then there came a moment and I'll call that the Body of Christ moment, when I saw my friend visibly choose to 'love' me and care for me, she didn't feel it in the moment, she chose it. And gradually our suffering was shared. I told the truth about where I thought I had led us wrong and also sort of where I thought we were still right. And so did she, and then we figured out where to go. Later in our friendship, the trust established that day served us well to do more important things. That's the point. Our fellowship wasn't for our own benefit, but for purpose.

This kind of conflict, where all intentions were good and we don't have the choice of starting over from a better beginning point, and everyone is suffering, but not together describes much of the conflict within church, and between churches, I believe.

The text tells us we will need to choose mutual love and real actions of care – not just expect to have a warm fuzzy feeling and hope we get along. And that wilful choice, the act of caring for one another will be what builds our compassion – this is what Paul says in the scripture - and allow us to escape navel-gazing as a church in favour of actually looking where we are going. Because the word still has need of us and we have purpose.

I'm going to say that again – the more excellent way? a church that is not just navel gazing, but is actually looking where we are going. That learns to do that not by some magical good luck but by actually choosing to care for one another. To share suffering and risk vulnerability. And friends, I have seen you do this here in this church. That preaching of Paul is fulfilled here, and today.

Because there are among us those in need. And those oppressed, there are in our world those for whom even to read the Gospel you have in front of you would be a forbidden act. And those who live with violence today. Or do not have the benefit of prayer, or of advocates, who when they are weak, have no strength to call on as we have strength to call on, in each other, when we are weak. And this is what we are for – whom we are for. That all may know the grace of Christ.

As we choose to identify with one another's need, we will strengthen the Body of Christ.

We the body of Christ are a glorious covenantal combination of planners and 'wait and see-ers,' of those who want to pray and those who want to hit the streets, those who know how to spend, and those who have a gift for saving. As much as the church at Corinth was Jew and Greek, slave and free – so are we today. From many different nations, Gay, and straight, and old and young, and some of us foolish and thank goodness some very wise ones. And we want to do more than just drive round and round the m25 – we want to arrive.

Friends God chose to come and sit shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye with us – not letting us hide at God's feet – Jesus whose body it was that was broken, and whose Body we have become. And God calls us to come and sit shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye with one another.

We read Paul's text and learn that diversity of talents and approach, conflict itself as we live together is not a sign of sickness within the body, but a pre-condition of order and balance. The muscles, the tendons which hold us all together are strong, and get stronger when they are used. We do not get strong by doing easy things. But by doing hard things, together. As we test one another, pull against one another - learn to hear and value and forgive one another, the muscles for truth telling, for loving action, the choice for care – these muscles get stronger as we use them.

And we may need to wilfully choose unity before we feel it – like my friend in the car - so that we can have space in that unity to feel one another's suffering, and rejoice with one another.

Jesus' that day in the synagogue announced not a new hierarchy or reversal of power, but the end of hierarchies. Those who trusted that teaching found new life in him. Those who preferred to hedge their bets broke his Body, and he offered them new life as well.

Even as we are the Body of Christ, it is still his Body. His that was broken, his that we become. And we were not called into this Body to stay static, but to live, and test one another, and serve, and grow.

And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Stand up friends. Shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye with the God who loves us.

AMEN.