

JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON
St Matthew's Westminster

Sunday 27 January 2019

1 Corinthians 12 1-31

Luke 4: 14-21

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“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it”

May I speak in the name of the Living God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit.

Most of us are familiar with the phrase “the body of Christ”.

Indeed, if we take communion regularly we hear it at the altar every Sunday.

But let’s go deeper into these words and ask ourselves:

What does it really mean to be an individual member of this body?

On this third Sunday of Epiphany the question is answered with remarkable clarity in today’s readings,

Let’s start with the Gospel, which describes the momentous occasion in the life of Jesus when he launched his God given ministry speaking publicly for the first time in his home town of Nazareth.

Some American preachers call this “The Nazareth Inaugural”.

This is a catchy headline although it does not begin to do justice to the global spiritual revolution that Jesus was actually inaugurating on that dramatic day.

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Nevertheless the Nazareth Inaugural did have one thing in common with the secular addresses of newly elected American Presidents. For the connection across the centuries is that there was in Nazareth, as there usually is in Washington DC, a tremendous amount of expectation in the air for both kinds of inaugural.

Last Sunday we focused on the story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee. At the moment when the wine ran out and Mary asked her son Jesus to do something to solve the problem, he spoke rather sharply to her saying

“My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4).

Now at the point we have reached today in the narrative of the Epiphany Jesus’s hour has come.

Luke makes it clear that expectations about him had been building up for some time. Reports on Jesus had been spreading through all the countryside of Galilee.

Just note in passing that Luke tells us by way of preamble that Jesus went to the Synagogue every Sabbath day “*as was his custom*”.

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Perhaps that's a divine hint all the way from the 1st century to the 21st century that going to our place of worship regularly is, or should be, a key element in our individual membership of the body of Christ.

Jesus accepted the spiritual discipline that God should be honoured in his house every Sabbath or now in our Christian Culture every Sunday.

It is one part of the commitment towards being a member of the body of Christ.

The more important part of a commitment to membership of the body of Christ is well summarised in another line from the story of the wedding at Cana Galilea. It comes when Mary tells the servants of the wedding who are in charge of the water jars

"Do whatever he tells you".

It's a reminder that obedience to Jesus is a crucial qualification for membership of the body of Christ.

So what commands did Jesus tell his followers to obey at the start of his ministry?

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Using as his template the prophesy of Isaiah proclaimed some 500 years earlier five commands are given:

- To bring good news to the poor
- To give the blind their sight
- To release the prisoners
- To liberate the oppressed
- To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
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The commands remind us that Jesus was not a comfortable, cosy, consensus building sort of preacher.

He was calling his followers to radical action.

If we want to be members of the body of Christ we have to prepare ourselves to rise to his challenges.

Those of us who instinctively belong in our restrained C of E way to the introspective Church reticent aren't too good at this kind of radical discipleship.

I discovered this myself when I went off to Oxford to read Theology nearly 20 years ago and studied at an evangelical college – Wycliffe Hall.

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Almost immediately I noticed several of my fellow students, about a quarter of them, were wearing coloured bracelets on their wrists, stamped with the letters WWJD. I later discovered that these letters stood for "What Would Jesus Do?"

Now I hadn't seen any of these bracelets around the wrists of members of our Anglo Catholic congregation here at St Matthew's Westminster.

So secretly I was rather sniffy about the bracelet brigade saying to myself "What on earth are my eager-beaver happy-clappy fellow students getting up to?"

But over the years, on reflection, I have come to think we should all ask ourselves "What Would Jesus Do?" question more often.

As we heard in our reading, he would proclaim the Gospel. That's what members of the body of Christ should do.

Do we make any effort to pass its good news on to the poor which means the spiritually as well as the materially poor or to the blind which includes the spiritually blind?

I am sure we all know friends, neighbours, acquaintances who might fall into the category of being spiritually impoverished or short sighted.

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How often do we try to persuade such neighbours to come to St Matthew's or any other church to hear the gospel?

This year I know that Father Philip hopes to grow our congregation by some new communications initiatives. When these are announced, please support them so that the good news reaches a wider audience at St Matthew's.

As for releasing the prisoners, this is a special interest of mine as a prison chaplain. So let me say a word about Jesus's attitude to prisoners which was far more loving and generous than our secular attitudes are today.

In the New Testament there are 54 mentions of prisoners. One or two of these prisoners were real hard men like Barabbas, the armed robber or even Satan who turns up in the Book of Revelations as a prisoner.

But most of the prisoners mentioned in the New Testament are good guys.

Like Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Silas and even Jesus himself. For Jesus was a prisoner the night before his crucifixion.

So no wonder he was sympathetic towards prisoners, urging us to visit them in his parable of the sheep and the goats.

Incidentally, I don't think the word prisoner in this passage from Isaiah quoted by Jesus, referred exclusively to prisoners of the state.

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There are many other kinds of prisoners.

Prisoners of pain, of broken relationships, of illness, of sin, or of family tensions.

Jesus offers liberation to them too.

As for liberating the oppressed, it is appropriate to remember on this anniversary of The Holocaust that in our modern world some of the most brutally oppressed minority groups across the planet are our fellow Christians, horribly persecuted by forces of evil in countries like Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, North Korea, Pakistan, and even in once tolerant Indonesia.

We need to ask ourselves if we do enough in our prayers and actions for our suffering brothers and sisters who are our fellow members in the body of Christ?

Finally, there was a revolutionary theological break though made by Jesus when he told that synagogue in Nazareth that he had come to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

The break-through was made by a deliberate omission.

Jesus edited out the final word of the quotation he was citing from Isaiah.

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The actual words in Isaiah 61 read:

“To proclaim the day of the Lord’s favour
and the day of vengeance of our God”.

But, Jesus dropped the line

“and the day of vengeance of our God”.

Why? Surely because he wanted to underline the grace, mercy and compassion of his ministry. His good news was really new, replacing the Old Testament message of punishment, retribution, divine judgement and divine vengeance with his New Testament message of forgiveness and love.

This new ministry is beautifully portrayed by a famous line from George Herbert’s poem on Prayer.

“Softness and peace, and love and joy and blisse”.

That’s what Jesus was bringing in with his good news to the poor, the oppressed and the prisoners.

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Then as now the Gospel got a mixed reception. If we were to read on further Luke, Chapter 4, we find that Jesus was driven out of Nazareth for preaching his good news because of his favourable references to the Gentiles. The Jews of the Nazareth synagogue didn't want to hear such tributes from despised outsiders.

But thanks to Paul who obediently followed Jesus, the Gentiles were brought inside the body of Christ, and welcomed to it.

And that brings us back to our first reading from Chapter 12 of the letter to the Corinthians – a most exuberant branch of the early church where all sorts of strange goings on characterised their worship practices.

None of those goings on were wrong. Speaking in tongues! Prophetic utterances! Miraculous healings! All are well trodden paths by members of the body of Christ even if we don't do them too often here at St Matthew's.

In our reading today Paul was calming down, almost hosing down, those exuberant Corinthians.

He reminded them that the Holy Spirit prefers Christian teamwork to Christian fireworks.

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If we want to be members of the one body of Christ, we need to share in each other's joys and sufferings.

We can't stay isolated in splendid isolation within our own comfort zone.

So, as Paul says strive for the greater gifts and unit in them, as he moves on to the most famous chapter of his epistle, Chapter 13.

He says that the most excellent way for members of the body of Christ to pursue is the way of Love.

A love which is patient, kind, never ending, greater even than faith and hope. It, of course, includes love for the oppressed, the blind, the poor and the prisoners.

Such is the love that qualifies us for membership of the body of Christ.

Amen