

## SS. Mary and Nicholas, Littlemore - August 21, 2005

Trinity 13: Romans 12. 1-8; Matthew 16. 13-20

***'So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another' (Romans 12. 5)***

Do you like your body? By this I mean: do you secretly enjoy looking at yourself in the mirror, or passingly admire your image in a shop window? Does it give you a little thrill when you see yourself flit by? Or do you subject yourself each time you catch a glimpse of yourself to a savage critical assessment: too fat, too sagging, too thin, too bent, too old? How do you think of yourself as a body? Do you fear that you will never again be, nor perhaps ever were, the satisfactory shape you really wanted to be, nothing like the Body Beautiful that leaps out from every television ad and every magazine page? Do you harbour a suspicion that your body, being not quite the slim or voluptuous shape that you would like it to be, is somehow less than lovable, a nasty genetic blip that went slightly wrong at the outset and has been letting you down ever since? Or, at the other end of the life spectrum, do you sometimes feel that your body is actually ebbing away: with sheer fatigue, with illness, with depression, or with approaching decay and death?

When Paul talks about the 'one body' that we are as a church this has more to do with these repetitive nagging worries we have about our own bodies than we might think. When he says, as he does in today's epistle, that we should 'present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God', he is talking about these same real bodies, these imperfect bodies that are us. He is asking us, then, when we come together as church, to re-think our bodies, to re-imagine them in a strange way, as actually making up 'Christ'. This is an exceptionally peculiar idea, when you come to think about it - that our bodies together 'make up' Christ; but it is also terribly good news, if we can only effect this act of re-imagining, and live by it, by what Paul calls 'the renewal of our minds'. It is good news, because if Paul is right, then these imperfect and sagging and dying bodies of ours really are the Body Beautiful after all. For what could be more beautiful than the body of God incarnate, Jesus Christ?

And that's who we are, here and now: his body, his church. There are just two aspects to this very peculiar idea in today's epistle that I want to draw out, for they act as a kind of pincer movement in Paul's theology of the body, ostensibly undercutting one another, but actually pointing together to the transcendent reality of Christ's continuing bodily presence in the church. We might say they are about our bodies' living, and about their dying.

The first aspect, then, is about the life of the body of the church, and about its members' mutual dependence on one another. As Paul puts it here in Romans 12: 'For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another'. Now as I see it, this idea helps us enormously in re-imagining the status of our sagging and imperfect bodies; for what Paul is saying is that precisely our lack of perfection, our very one-sidedness or lopsidedness, is what is needed for Christ to use us to 'make up' his body. For his church is exactly not a forum of 'perfect' bodies competing, or rivalling one another, on a cat-walk of theological excellence; on the contrary, says Paul, our inadequacies, our relative lack of bodily beauty, is exactly what allows the body of Christ to have the supreme quality it does: my individual weakness, my bodily sagging (we might say), is more than compensated for by your small contribution of bodily giftedness, and vice versa. In other words, if we were not individually imperfect bodies, we could

not together make up the perfect body of Christ that is the church. We are not in the church to compete, as the world does, but to be 'members one of another' in all our bodily imperfections and our bodily giftedness. That is how our bodies should live in the church, interdependently, as the Body Beautiful of Christ.

The second aspect of Christ's continuing presence in the church as his body is, in seeming contrast, a matter of our bodies' dying. Although this part of Paul's theology of the body is less explicit in this morning's epistle text, it is nonetheless implicitly carried forward from what he has said about baptism into Christ's death and resurrection in the earlier chapters of the letter to the Romans, and it is woven into the very thought of our mutual deferral to each other's bodies, our giving way to the life of the other in the mutual dependencies of the body of the church. This Pauline thought of bodily dying in the church was made vivid to me this last week as I sat beside my father's hospital bed wondering whether he would live through his own sudden, critical illness, and observing the unexpected collapse of his body and mind. He wanted to hold my hand because he was in a lot of pain, and I realised that I had not held this hand since I had been a very small child, nearly fifty years ago, and now the dependencies had been reversed.

Afterwards, coming back from London in the bus, I suddenly remembered a joke he had once told - a very theological joke, which for him is unusual - but one truly worthy of St. Paul's theology of the body. The joke is about a very decrepit old man in hospital who asks his doctor whether his poor old body has any chance of recovery. Without missing a beat the doctor instantly replies: 'You most certainly will recover; but it may not be in your lifetime'.

What a wonderful, sparky, Pauline answer. It encapsulates the idea not only that my seemingly unsatisfactory, sagging body has something crucial to contribute to the body of Christ in my living; but also that my frail, dying body has something unique to give and to gain for that same body of Christ: the hope of salvation, the goal of being part of the eternal church triumphant. This idea of the significance of even our bodily death for the body of the church - of a recovery of our bodies in and beyond death (though 'not in our lifetime!') - is also promised by Paul as a glorious extension of the Body Beautiful which we call 'the church'. It is another part of the re-imagining of what Christ's 'body' means, to believe that death is not the final word to our individual bodies, but rather a mysterious passage into another phase of the rich life of the body of his church.

'So we who are many are one body': Christ's body. It is, to be sure, a very peculiar idea, one we have to keep working on imaginatively, turning it over, by 'the renewal of [our] minds'. It goes against all appearances, all the logic of the world's thinking. But in my limited body's need of you and your need of me, and in my frail body's acceptance of dependency and death, are all the raw ingredients of our together being transformed into the true Body Beautiful, the body of Christ. It is this living into the body of Christ that makes us even now 'holy' and 'acceptable' to God, says Paul; it is therefore this also that assures us of our final 'recovery' - of the real 'goodness' and even 'perfection' (as Paul puts it) of our mortal bodies. I for one have staked my life on this mysterious Body Beautiful; and I know and trust that you have too. Amen.

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