

## I

# ‘What is it with you lot?’

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

1 Corinthians 12.24–26

We are the body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptized into the one body. Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.<sup>1</sup>

Of the many ills perceived to be affecting our society at the moment, one of the greatest is fragmentation. Harsh comparisons are drawn with some previous period or different country, in whose villages everyone takes care of everyone else and doors can be left unlocked all day without fear of burglary; where the street is a safe place and families eat, breathe and live closely together in a solid and stable community of support and care.

The seminal sociological study by Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, paints a picture of such a time, when the mother–daughter relationship was the defining structure in most families, and when it was not unusual for family members not living in the same household to see each other two, three or four times a day. And we are often told of the way in which children are reared in villages in Africa, where discipline and support are shared among the community and each child is the responsibility of all.

To be sure, these pictures of life in a bygone age or a distant place are viewed through spectacles heavily tinted. There was,

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1 *Common Worship*, Eucharist Order 1, Contemporary language.

briefly, a low crime rate in London in the 1950s; but the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were no time to be out on the streets late at night. The 1950s were a time of shock and recovery after the cataclysm that was the Second World War. Village life may indeed in many ways offer security and community, but woe betide those who fall out of favour with that community, or who do not fit in, or who are rejected because of their difference. The village structure on the islands of Western Samoa is remarkable in its strength and stability; but those who do not wish or who are unable to conform, for whatever reason, are soon exiled to the island's capital, Apia, where their residence is often hand-to-mouth since a community of support hardly exists there.

Comparisons between the twenty-first century and the 1950s, or with small subsistence communities from any age, are like comparing mangoes and hazelnuts. The changes that have taken place across the world over the last 50 years have been exponentially greater in almost every way than the changes that affected societies in the centuries before. Travel, technology, migration, the position of women, the recognition of human rights, the acknowledgement of same-sex gender attraction and love, the recognition of the equality of different ethnic groups, universal suffrage as a pre-condition for democracy – all of these have in different ways contributed to the transformation of society in ways undreamt of by philosophers, theologians, sociologists or policy-makers as little as 50 years ago.

We are, indeed, in a brave new world. We are in a world characterized by diversity and difference, by instability and innovation. We are in a world that, by and large, celebrates the onward march of capitalism and the gifts it offers – the availability of mass tourism, the instant access to information and entertainment, the fluidity and flux of fashion, the availability of luxury and comfort on a level inconceivable even to our grandparents.

Above all, the greatest change, certainly in western societies, has been the recognition that the individual has rights over and against the community, and that no one should be disadvantaged by society because of any factor inherent in their birth; whether

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that is to do with their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, whether they are rich or poor, able or have a disability. Articles 1 and 2 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights read:

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

In the middle of all this – or, rather, increasingly on the edge of all this – lies the church. Established millennia ago, on a model that owes more to empire and to Roman jurisdiction than to anything that has transformed society in the last ten decades, being primarily a patriarchal institution with a clear hierarchy of bishops, priests and laity (or in the Reformed tradition, ministers and laity), the church is finding itself increasingly exposed to the chill winds of modernity without the resources to be able to respond.

Its language, culture, self-understanding and history are all derived from a way of being that is increasingly out of step with the world it tries to serve. Like a cathedral on a hill, it is buffeted and battered by wind and rain, and sometimes it seems as if the only response it can make is to close its doors and try to turn the heating up, in the hope that those inside won't hear the storm or feel the cold.

It reads its source documents – the scriptures – through the eyes of its history, and sees in them justifications for its past behaviour rather than enlightenment on how it might respond to the present. In so doing it undermines its past and denies its

present, with the result that the future is at best a shadowy possibility and at worst non-existent.

Of course, this is a caricature. There have been major and significant changes in the life of the church; the recognition of lay responsibility in the structures of the church, the ordination of women to the priesthood in England and to the episcopate in other Anglican provinces and other denominations; the end of apartheid in South Africa and the recognition of the equality of people from different ethnicities across the western churches; the updating of liturgy and worship so that it is in the language and media of the present rather than the past, and, above all, the constant background noise of discussion, debate and controversy as to how far future changes might take the church.

But these changes have, by and large, been slow, late and grudging. They have come about as a result of enormous pressure for change, and the leaders of the church have rarely been at the forefront of that pressure. Self-preservation more than prophecy has in many cases been a motivating factor, and instead of offering a new vision for a new society, all too often the old vision has been re-offered in a slightly different pattern or colourway.

The sadness is that the new vision is right at the heart of the church's faith. One of the most striking innovations in the Church of England's liturgy was brought in during the 1960s, to strong resistance at the time, but now welcomed as an intrinsic part of the liturgy – the peace. In exchanging the peace with one another, we are explicitly acknowledging the essential truth of the words: 'We *are* the body of Christ. In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Let us then pursue *all* that makes for peace and builds up our common life.'<sup>2</sup>

The scriptures should be documents of liberation, not oppression. Within them, in the words used at services of ordination, is contained 'all that is necessary for salvation', if they can be read and understood fully and completely. They are the written expression of hundreds of years' attempts to understand God, and God's relationship with humanity and the world. As such,

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<sup>2</sup> *Common Worship*, Eucharist Order 1, Contemporary language. Italics mine.

their contents are astonishingly diverse – ranging from history to poetry, and from story to law.

We, as readers of the Bible, do not come to it like blank canvases. We bring our cultural background, language, expectations and preconceptions. We understand the past through the lens of the present, and we interpret scripture through the lens of our faith and of our world. What is happening when we read the Bible is that we are entering into a relationship with the text that is before us, and with the almost always anonymous authors of the text; the past meets the future in the present, and we as readers are shaped by and shape our understandings of the words we read.

Scripture is not, in other words, a telephone directory; neither is it the Highway Code. Much reading of the Bible in recent years, particularly in the last century, was with the aim of finding the ‘original meaning’ of the passage, through various types of critical method – especially ‘historical criticism’.<sup>3</sup> But it is not possible to find our way back to the ‘original meaning’ any more than it is possible to understand how, say, the first hearers of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony would have heard the music. We cannot take ourselves out of our context; but this is a virtue, not a vice. For the Bible speaks now as then in all its richness and depth. One of the sad things about the present situation facing the church is that many of those who have strong views, especially of a conservative hue, have in some ways reduced the scriptures to a version of an ethical code that conforms to their understanding of ethics, and this tragically distorts and diminishes the richness and depths of God’s Word.

The Christian tradition contains a constant undertone of

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3 ‘In sum, when apologists for historical criticism say that history is necessary because Christianity is an historical religion, they are using the term “history” in two very different ways: one to refer to something as having happened in the past, and the other to a set of disciplinary practices and rules. History, in the latter sense, as a *discipline*, cannot serve as the epistemological foundation for theology, nor should Christians insist that the “historical-critical” meaning of the biblical text serve as a *necessary foundation* for theological use of scripture’ (Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 14).

challenge and liberty, of saints and activists who went out into the world and tried to live out the vision of the new Jerusalem; the gruff and the joyful, Octavia Hill and St Francis, F. D. Maurice and Mother Julian of Norwich. The onward march of reason and rationality, through the Reformation into the Enlightenment and on into modernity and postmodernity, has carried theologians and thinkers with it. We have increasingly begun to interpret and to understand God not as the patriarch portrayed by Michelangelo but as the undefinable defined of the early Fathers. There is a school of early theology (the ‘apophatic’ school) that holds that it is only possible to say what God is not, rather than what God is. The paternalistic but judgemental image of God associated with the Middle Ages has developed into a conception of God that is harder to picture and less like an angry headmaster – and faith and theology continue to develop.

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The metaphor of the body is perhaps the most commonly used biblical metaphor for the Church. There are many others – the vine, the flock, the City of God, the *ekklesia* or assembly; but the body has such deep resonances that it has continued as a defining symbol and identification of the nature of church. It is a metaphor, an analogy, often used within the New Testament; it is certainly the metaphor with which Paul is most comfortable and that he uses most often in his passionate, argumentative, determined and inspiring letters to the communities of followers of Christ which he established.

Paul’s use of the image of the body contains within it, in embryo, all the theological insights which are creeping up almost unnoticed on the church today. The insights which will, once we begin to take them seriously, offer a way of being church in the world which is both coherent and rational, which responds to the insights of the twentieth century without throwing out the depth of theological understanding which enlightened the nineteenth centuries before. It is within the metaphor of the body that, implicitly, the fundamentals of the UN Declaration of Human

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Rights can be found, establishing the equality and dignity of humanity on the basic Christian understanding that humans are created in the *imago dei* – image of God – and that as such they form part of the body of Christ.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member, but of many. If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. 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?’

1 CORINTHIANS 12.14–17

The idea of inclusion, when applied to Christianity, has on many occasions been dismissed as an uncritical importation of the human rights agenda into the church. Its critics have sought to reduce its significance by identifying inclusion with a liberal, secular agenda without scriptural foundation, going on to say that it is neither biblical nor justified by the tradition of the church. Those of us who call for a fully inclusive church are called ‘revisionists’, as opposed to the ‘reasserters’ who feel called to reassert the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

The metaphor of the body, containing as it does the idea of creation being by its very nature diverse and interdependent, is at once the most traditional, most radical and most generous understanding of church imaginable. Traditional, because it recognizes the eucharistic centre of the church in the life, death and resurrection of Christ who instituted the Eucharist. Radical, because the body in order to survive and thrive is continually regenerating itself, continually changing, continually growing – and yet remaining the same. Generous, because it contains within it the recognition of our deep and undeniable mutual interdependence, as Paul recognizes:

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for

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one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

1 Corinthians 12.24–26

Inclusion is at the heart of Paul's theology. He it is who says to the Corinthians:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

1 Corinthians 1.27–29

He recognizes that the gospel brings in the outcast and the rejected – 'Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth' (1 Corinthians 1.26) – so that the new world order can be created and the gospel can be seen to be at work, here, on earth, among the people of God and in the body of Christ.

Of course, there are parts of Paul's letters which appear to be the opposite of inclusive; the apparent condemnation of same-sex relationships in Romans 1.27, the very clear instructions on the behaviour of women at, for example, 1 Corinthians 11.2–6 and 1 Corinthians 14.33–36. Any attempt to argue for a vision of a church which is truly welcoming of all must take these sections of scripture seriously.

But equally, both the Gospels and the Epistles are very clear in their call for the inclusion of all people, whether they are rich (Zacchaeus) or poor (the Syro-Phoenician woman) – whether they are part of the establishment (Nicodemus) or part of the underclass (the woman at the well) – whether they are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. A foundational message of the New Testament is that all are one in Christ Jesus.

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Yugoslavia, before the death of General Tito. Many different groups – Serbian, Croatian, Muslim – live alongside one another,

apparently in harmony and apparently working well together. Dissent is suppressed and genuine encounter not encouraged, in a police state where the power rests entirely with the dictator, the Communist Party and the secret service. Almost immediately after Tito’s death, the country erupts into violence; quickly, new states are formed – Slovenia, Croatia – and then follows the absolute horror of the Balkans, the terrible ethnic cleansing, the massacres and violence and rape and slaughter.

In the middle of all this, Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian now working in the United States, asks: ‘How can I love my enemy?’ How, he asks, can I love the person who is living on the land which was mine, who has stolen my livelihood and might have killed my brother or raped my mother?

His book *Exclusion and Embrace* is an extended theological reflection on the ‘history of vicious cultural, ethnic, and racial strife’<sup>4</sup> that has characterized the three areas with which Volf was particularly concerned at the time of writing the book: Sarajevo, Los Angeles and Berlin. The particular challenge he poses is to try to make sense of the great commandment to ‘love your enemy’ in the context of the Yugoslavian descent into violence and murder, but there can hardly be said to be a place in the world which does not at some level have a history of violence, oppression and exclusion.

It may be thought extreme to compare an English parish to Sarajevo, but the conclusions Volf reaches have resonances for the most mild-mannered congregation in the outer reaches of the English countryside. Of particular relevance is his meditation on the nature of ‘embrace’, to which he comes after detailed consideration of the causes and consequences of the exclusion of the other to which human society seems to be endemically committed.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Luke 15.20

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4 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 14.

The human tendency to create groups and communities of identity, whether it be membership of the golf club or the dramatic society, membership of one street gang over against another, or membership of one ethnic group fighting with another for the same land, is an outworking of our ability to conceive of ourselves as individuals alongside other individuals, with some of whom we identify and some of whom we reject. Our separation from one another is, in the Christian narrative, a reflection of our separation from God; and it is only through union with God that we can achieve union with one another. The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, ‘The deepest root of all servitude is the breaking of friendship with God and with other human beings, and cannot therefore be eradicated except by the unmerited redemptive love of the Lord whom we receive by faith and in communion with one another.’<sup>5</sup>

‘When we were still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home.’<sup>6</sup> The action of embrace, according to Volf, has four component parts: first, opening the arms. Second, waiting. Third, closing the arms. And fourth, opening them again. In these four actions we both engage with and acknowledge the identity of the other. By opening the arms, we invite the other to come towards us. By waiting, we allow them to make their decision, freely, whether to receive the love we offer and to offer love themselves. By closing the arms, we acknowledge the giving and the receiving of love. And by opening them again, we allow the other to continue to be the individual we have embraced, but in a new relationship which acknowledges our interdependence and our mutual love.

It is in the embrace between the alienated father and son, or in the embrace of Jesus on the cross (‘He opened wide his arms for us upon the cross’<sup>7</sup>) that we find the core of the life of the Christian community, the parish, the church congregation. We are, in the end, a sacramental community which derives its

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5 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, xxxviii.

6 *Common Worship*, Eucharistic Prayer Order 1, Contemporary language.

7 Eucharistic Prayer B.

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being, its sense of existential status, from the two sacraments of baptism and communion; and of these two, communion most profoundly symbolizes and expresses the radical renewal of the relationship of love to which we are called.

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An Anglican parish church, in a city suburb. Sunday morning, before the main service at 10.30. Somebody is preparing the service sheets. Somebody else is setting up the altar. A couple of people are organizing Junior Church, and two other people are deep in discussion about the coffee rota. The clergy are wandering around getting under people’s feet, and the organist arrives, late, and breathlessly looks for the hymn tunes in the old book because the new one has gone missing. Someone wanders in off the street wanting to know if we’re Anglican or Catholic, and a long-standing family (grandmother, 93, mother, 61, daughter, 33, granddaughter, 11) make their stately way up the church steps bidding a gracious good morning to all they meet.

In that small cast of characters we have: four Sierra Leoneans; one Nigerian woman (bisexual); two gay men; two white working-class women (one clergy, one lay); one white working-class man (clergy, straight); one woman with long-term mental health problems; one man (divorced) recently married to his divorced partner and looking after his mother who has Alzheimer’s; one young middle-class woman who is avowedly atheist but celebrates the church community; and two Nigerian matriarchs who see themselves as responsible for the smooth running of the church, come what may.

As the congregation starts to arrive, so the diversity grows. Age, wealth, social status, employment, sexual orientation, ability; all are thrown into the melting pot, and in the chatter and the praying, the singing and the hearing, the ingredients begin to meld. The disparate become one, and the individuals become a community. Briefly, in the moment after the Eucharist, there is a silence. And, perhaps, in that silence, broken maybe by a baby crying or by the sneeze of an old lady with a cold, the community

acknowledges itself as a communion, and has a sense of itself as something beyond itself, as a reflection (however muddied, however pale) of the kingdom of God we are called to celebrate.

By the end of the notices the sense of unity is going; by coffee time it's almost gone. But there's a memory, still, of the sense of the glory of the presence of the Lord that will linger and grow week by week. So, gradually, the community builds; we *are* the body of Christ, and we *are becoming* the body of Christ.

A happy accident? A simple reflection of a local event, with no significance beyond the way in which this church attempts to serve the people of its parish? Something unachievable in more monochrome, more unified areas where the population is universally reasonably well off and predominantly white? Or something more significant?

It is in the richness and diversity of church congregations that the body of Christ is reflected. At the heart of the gospel is the incarnation, with all that it tells us about the love of God for the world God created, and the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ. The world God created in its infinite beauty and indescribable diversity, where each of us, from the ant to the elephant and from the amoeba to Alpha Centauri, is inextricably co-dependent, individual, different and united. The church, at its best, is called to celebrate that; because the church is both a gift of God in creation and a vision of the new Jerusalem.

The imperative implicit within the metaphor of the body is that the people who make up the church recognize the depth of their interdependence. We are not like a skip left outside a house under renovation, being filled indiscriminately with bits of old tile, a broken sofa, a couple of tin teapots and a great deal of rubble. Although the diversity of a church community is usually a reflection of the area in which that community is placed, the challenge laid upon us is to turn the happy accident into a positive virtue; to create something out of nothing, to transform a mixed group of individuals into something with a significance beyond itself, which, in its relationships and its commitment, models and reflects the relationship and the commitment of Jesus to the world he loves.

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You may be thinking: ‘Our church is not like that. Our area is not mixed; our people are all from similar social backgrounds, share a commonality of interests, are fairly monochrome – what is the inclusive imperative for us?’ But all is never as it seems. The assumption of similarity can obscure the recognition that even if diversity is not so immediately visible, within every congregation is a mix and a melting pot of home situations, of personality types, of characters, of political and social views which, if unrecognized, can mean that the *ekklesia*, the assembly, will be unable to move beyond a largely superficial way of relating. Then, differences of opinion may be shoved firmly under the carpet, resulting in a non-engagement that, in its way, can be deeply counterproductive – even destructive, if conformity is bought at the cost of honesty. Or there is the contrary danger, in a place where diversity is obvious and all the ‘inclusion’ boxes can be ticked, that although lip service is paid to the need to communicate and engage, there is little beyond superficial acknowledgement of the multifarious people around. The result, similarly, is stasis.

The life of the parish is both banal and cosmic; both mundane and transcendent. Behind the arguments about the coffee rota, the annual donations to international development projects, the common round of hymns and visits and parties and parish projects and visits by the bishop, lies the consciousness of the possibility of a radical, renewed and reinvigorated relationship between God and humanity, a transformation of all that drives us apart –

‘We *are* the body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were *all* baptized into the one body. Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Common Worship*, Eucharist Order 1, Contemporary language (my italics).