

Corinthians 12:12-31

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴And so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵Now if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

The body of Christ.

Why is the church disunited? Are we not filled with the love of God?!

There is a woman who lives in one of our villages who is relatively free in her opinions, and who has said on a number of occasions, 'if only the churches would work together!' I'm not aware that she has been in any church at any point through the last few years. And I'm a little exasperated by her capacity to 'advise'. But I must admit that there is much truth in what she says, and a commendable degree of hope. How wonderful to believe that cooperation between Anglicans, Catholics and all others would spark so much more goodness! This is something that you and I really should believe.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has just finished — a week in which churches internationally, of all denominations were commended to pray and work together for greater unity. A brief scan of the history of the Christian church sees the remarkable capacity for the church to break apart.

In the early centuries as the gospel spread there were a number of significantly heretical sects that broke off, misunderstanding the divinity of Christ, or the humanity of Christ or the nature of the Trinity, or whether it was forgivable or not to deny your faith under pressure of persecution and then repent of that later.

1054 saw the great schism between the Catholic and Orthodox church — a split that had been centuries in the making and a division over language, theology, and the insertion of a single Latin word into the Nicene Creed.

1517 saw the birth of Protestantism, which saw a multiplication of denominations, most of which I don't fully understand, but which were caused by the zealous desire to retrieve serious theology and serious worship after a period of difficulty for Christianity. Now, we can find differences between whether we like BCP or modern language, the hymns we like,

whether we agree with women being made bishops, or gay people being married or blessed in church, and many more things. Unity looks like a vain hope in such circumstances.

One of the most holy sites for Christianity in Jerusalem is the church of the Holy Sepulchre — allegedly the place where Jesus was buried before his resurrection on Easter Sunday. If you look at the front of the church there is a ladder on a parapet, leaning against the sill of a window. This ladder has been there for centuries, because there is an agreement between the six denominations who have joint care of the cathedral not to do anything to the building without the consent of all the others. You can look up ‘the immovable ladder’ on wikipedia. It has its own article.

What can we do then, to be more united? What can we do to be the body of Christ in real practice?

Firstly — we must remember to value the things that unite us more highly than the divisions. We must focus on the cross and the resurrection; the unity of the Trinity, God’s love and grace, and the hope we have in Christ. These are far more important than anything else.

Secondly, we need not only to believe in unity, but practice it. How does that work? I would suggest three things.

Firstly, we must have curiosity. Curiosity is tiring. It is sapping to admit that we do not know everything, and to learn new things. But on the other hand curiosity can challenge us, inspire us, lead us to personal growth. Without curiosity we can persist in lazy judgements, trusting that someone else’s opinion could legitimately be mine. Be curious. Go and find out. Dare to ask questions. Discover that the ‘other’ is not the monster they have been portrayed as.

Secondly listen. Listening is a real skill. How often have you felt as if the person listening to you was really not listening, but waiting impatiently for the chance to share their own opinion? How often have you been that impatient non-listener? We should be able to listen well enough to repeat back the point that the other has just said, at least.

While listening, we also need to pay attention to language. Sarah has an American friend called Britney, with whom she communicates by WhatsApp a lot. The other day this friend talked about her dog going ‘spastic’. Sarah was shocked, and warned her that we find this word really offensive. But for Americans it is not. They do not have the history we have with the word. So, while listening, we need to be careful to hear what people are meaning, and not what that word means to us.

And finally, we need to exercise humility about the things we consider to be knowledge. For example, I might ‘know’ that a society that cares for the last, the least and the lost makes for a better world. I’m pretty confident of that. The new American president ‘knows’ something else, and will not be shaken on it. To find any meeting ground would require significant humility regarding what we take for granted. There are very many causes of disagreement for which this kind of humility is required for us to develop unity. But for us Christians it all starts with knowing Christ, and it all starts with love. The love of God is the principle, the foundation on which our faith and action sit, and is the cause of our changing ourselves towards being the kind of people who can unite in truth, honesty and love.

In all these things: curiosity, good listening and humility, we have been talking about the body of Christ. One of the things that stands out for me in this passage is that we *are* united in the body of Christ. We cannot choose to be united in only a small part of the body. If we accept Jesus Christ as our saviour — if we have faith — then we are *completely* part of Christ’s body. Now, we must play our part well.

What comes next in Paul’s letter, the passage after what we read today, is ‘the wedding bit’, the famous passage about love. If you get a chance, do read again 1 Corinthians 12, but read

on, into 13, in which Paul encourages love. Not as a warm feeling, but as a practical, relational reality, shown in action. And remember that our unity comes out of God's love, and our love for God.

Why is the church disunited? Aren't we filled with the love of God?! Yes. We are also broken, sinful people, and it is our very human messed-up-ness that leaves the church fractured. What is the solution? More of the love of God, healing us, reviving us, transforming us — and our working hard to maximise the outcome of that grace in our lives.

Amen.