**1 Corinthians 12:12-20**

**Finding unity in diversity**

How does a church deal with division and difference in its congregation? How does a church cope when there are strong feelings held over a particular issue or when a church seems to be taking a new direction in terms of mission and ministry? How is a local congregation meant to deal with that?

 It is an issue common to the church throughout the ages, of course. Church history is the history of a community riven with divisions, seemingly always at odds with one another about how things should be done and what is the appropriate way to reflect God to the world.

 The history of the church has not always been very edifying, has it? And I am sure that God weeps when he sees how Christians have constantly failed to work through their divisions whilst holding on to love and compassion and kindness.

 It’s sad that the church has failed to recognize a fundamental truth that, actually, difference – even conflict – is a good thing if it is engaged with properly. It’s a basic law of the natural world that conflict and difference actually leads to growth and life. In the body, cells break away from one another and multiply – and new life occurs. Friction is the resistance that objects experience when they rub against each other - and yet the natural law of friction enables things to move and life to exist.

 It is part of the DNA of God’s world that conflict and difference and friction are not to be avoided but to be embraced and handled with understanding and sensitivity so that new life can occur.

 When Paul was writing his letter to this church at Corinth, there was a lot of friction, there was a lot of difference and, sadly, they were not handling it very well at all. So Paul wrote to them to try to get them to understand that embracing difference would be the gateway to spiritual life and strength and growth.

 If you want to follow the passage with me, it’s on page 186 on the pew Bibles

 Paul was the father of this new, emerging movement called Christianity and his task was to travel round the ancient world and set up churches and establish congregations wherever he went. If you were St. Paul and you wanted to set up a new movement called The Church and you were looking for a city to work in, then Corinth would be top of your list. It was an amazing city, a newly built city from the ruins of an ancient place, it had a strong commercial centre with market places drawing people in from all over the Roman Empire who could hear the Gospel and head back to their homes to start churches there too. Corinth was busy, busy, busy – a bit like London is today.

 And so Paul establishes a church there - and we might think that it was a strong, successful church. But the truth is, that it was a deeply divided church with arguing going on below the surface and divisions amongst the congregation that were always ready to blow. When Paul wrote this letter to them, Corinth wasn’t a happy church at all…

 In Chapter 1, verse 11, Paul writes: “It has been reported to me that there are quarrels among you...Each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’ or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Peter’ or ‘I belong to Christ…’” There was division, with each member of the church lining up behind a different leader. In Chapter 4, verse 18, Paul writes: “But some of you have become arrogant…” Not only was there division amongst the members of the congregation, but we read in Chapter 5 that there was sexual immorality going on and in Chapter 11 that Holy Communion had become a source of division as well. In Chapter 15, we read that false doctrines were being believed.

 The church at Corinth looked fine from the outside but within its walls, the church was in a bad place…

 But Paul loved this church very much, he loved the members of the church and he wasn’t prepared to give up on them. So he writes them two letters to help them sort themselves out.

 And Paul didn’t give up on the church at Corinth because he knew that God would never give up on it, either…God had poured his Holy Spirit into that congregation and each member of the church had spiritual gifts to offer, a service and ministry to undertake and Paul wanted to help them find their way with God so that Corinth could become the church it had been destined to be in God .

 Paul knew what God knew: that the church in Corinth had the potential to change and fulfill its destiny in the midst of that busy city…

 So how did Paul want to instill in the congregation a sense of vision for the future? What was the starting point of his argument? Well, three simple points:

**1. They needed to realize the reality of their unity**

Yes, there were different opinions in the church. Yes, there were different ideas floating around. Yes, it was a very mixed church in terms of age and culture and spirituality. But underneath the diversity existed a unity that held them all together and the Christians in Corinth had to rediscover a sense of their unity if they were to work through their issues in a godly, kind, and loving way…

 Unity was the bedrock of becoming the church God had destined it to be: a unity in diversity.

 Paul says at the beginning of our reading in Chapter 12: “The body is one and has many members…” Now, this is a very simple spiritual law that is reflected in nature, which is this: that unity is worked out through the holding together of diversity. The world in which we live is not filled with the same things: the world is not made up solely of oak trees, the world is not one big drop of water, the world is not full of elephants and nothing else. The world in which we live is incredibly diverse, with trillions upon countless trillions of different elements all maintaining their sense of difference, and yet making up on whole thing called ‘The World’.

 And Paul says the same thing here about the human body. The body is made up of different organs, each with their own functions, each with their individual way of working. But just because the ear is different from the foot, which is different from the finger, which is different from the lung, which is different from the thigh…it doesn’t mean that there isn’t unity. It just means that the unity embraces diversity and difference.

 And so it is with the church – so it is with St. Andrew’s. The truth is that there are real differences in this congregation: different gifts, different talents, different ministries different ideas about God and worship and what our church should be doing. But just because there is difference, it doesn’t mean there can’t be unity.

 What we need to do is strive for a unity that embraces difference rather than a unity that tries to eradicate difference.

 We must realize afresh the reality of our unity that is built solely on the embracing of our differences. If we achieve that unity, then we will truly be the church that God has called us to be…

 And what is it that is the bedrock of our unity? Well, this passage from Scripture suggests to us the bedrock of our unity is the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.

 What does Paul say in verse 13? “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body…and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.”

 The Bible makes it absolutely clear that our unity is expressed by us all sharing Baptism and all sharing Communion. Paul says, “We were all baptized…we were all made to drink…” Paul is absolutely clear here that participation in the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion is the source of our unity as Christians and that we are to guard that unity and build upon it.

 And the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion are so important because they are the way in which God imparts his Holy Spirit to us. Verse 13 again: “In the one Spirit we were all baptized…we were all made to drink of one Spirit”. Baptism and Holy Communion are the two primary means by which Christians receive God’s sacramental grace through his Holy Spirit and are the source and ultimate symbol of the unity we hold.

 So first, Paul urges us to realize the unity we share and to unite together through the sacramental life of the Church.

**2. We are to embrace difference and diversity and see it as life-giving, not life-draining**

Paul goes on in verse 14-20 to show the purpose of diversity with this metaphor from the human body. Each member of the body is equally valued and equally useful and no, one, member of the body should despise the role of another. Foot, hand, ear, eye – each is equally valuable in the body.

 And their usefulness is a result of God’s careful bringing together of the various parts, as we read in verse 18: “But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose”.

 And so it is at St. Andrew’s Church. This church, this congregation, is not of human creation. It is not you or I would have sculpted and created St. Andrew’s. This church has come about through the ordering and the creativity of God. He has brought each one of us here. He has given each one of us gifts to be used through the church. He has brought us into relationship with one another. We are where we are because God has designed it this way.

 Our task, as we know, is to try to understand how God wants his body – St. Andrew’s – to move and then to move in the direction he takes his body. And that means that, at various points in our history, certain parts of the body will take a primary role. One time, the foot will take precedence; another time, the hand will be our focus. At some stage, we will need to pay extra heed to the lungs. At another stage, we will need to care for our waistline! The body of Christ here at St. Andrew’s is a living, organic, moving body - and our task is, at every stage, to go wherever God wants to take his body.

 Now, that can be frustrating and, at times, can cause discomfort. I know the many times when I have had to prioritise my waistline by going on a diet and my tummy has had a lot to say about it..! But it has been the right thing to do at the time. And so we need to be patient and to always focus on the big picture of the movement of the body and to work out how we can best support that movement at any given time.

 So first, we need to realize afresh the reality of our unity.

 Secondly, we need to celebrate our diversity and follow God’s leading of his body.

**3. We must realize afresh the holy calling of the church**

I think Paul surprises us a little bit in verse 12 because just when we think he is going to say one thing, he says something completely different. When I read that verse, I always expect him to say the word ‘church’. I expect him to say this: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with the church.”

 But he doesn’t say that, does he? Instead, he says this: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ.”

 And by phrasing it like this, Paul is drawing a comparison, perhaps even an equivalence, between Christ and the Church. For Paul, there is a really strong connection between Christ and the Church. If you are baptized, you are ‘in Christ’. Paul is absolutely clear about this in Romans 6, where he writes this: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life”.

 If you are baptized, you are in Christ. It is as simple as that. And the Church is the living out together of our ‘in-Christness’.

 So Paul is really raising the theological stakes here. He is telling the Christians at Corinth – who are not handling their divisions very well - that they way they speak to one another, the way they interact with one another, the way they cope with differences, is actually a reflection to the wider world of how Christ responds to difference and how Christ wants to interact with the world.

 The Church is the Body of Christ - and how we are with one another speaks to the reputation of Christ in the world.

 The Church is the Body of Christ - it is not just another interest group, it is not just another club we can join.

 The Church is the Body of Christ in the world - and we must keep that foremost in our minds every day of our lives because you and I are representing Christ to the world in how we live and how we speak and in how we love…

 So in conclusion, Paul is reminding us through this passage in 1 Corinthians that we shoulder a great responsibility as we participate in the community life of St. Andrew’s. We are reflecting God to the world in our words and our deeds: what people see of us, they see of God - and we need to live up to that responsibility.

 That means, of course, that each one of must be mindful of how we conduct ourselves at work during the week, within our family lives, and when we are out socialising - because what people see of us, they see of God.

 But as a community together, we must shoulder the responsibility of being the Body of Christ together, which is a holy calling. We must hold fast to our unity. We must embrace and celebrate our diversity. We must move as one body, supporting and encouraging one another.

 And, as we pursue this holy calling together, we must keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus and remember that it is only through him that we have a sense of community; a sense of purpose, and a destiny to fulfil.

 God has chosen us and gifted us to represent him to the world, to Enfield. We are stewards together of that calling, stewards of these gifts, and we must resolve increasingly to use them wisely, and with compassion and with kindness and with love.