

Epiphany 3  
24/1/2016

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 12:13-31a

Psalm 19

Luke 4:14-21

### No mere body politic

---

One effect of the acids of modernity for thinking about ourselves in relation to God has been to render religious belief largely irrelevant to public life.

This might seem rather an odd thing to say given the wars and terrorist actions around the world at the moment, many of which are greatly energised by religious convictions. Yet, even as this is the case, it is *not* the case that nation-states or even the churches are engaged with these struggles as *religious* struggles.

There is a remarkable absence of critique of terrorist actions and sectarian wars in terms of their religious content or motivation. No critic denies that this motivation is there but the response to it, because of the avowedly secular nature of most western societies, is necessarily non-religious. In relation to Islamic terrorism appeal can be made, say, to other Muslims who seem not to be fostering war or terror, but this is not a religious engagement. It is simply a strategy by which a state or a society seeks to broaden responsibility for keeping things more or less in control by appealing to “good” religionists to keep the dangerous religionists in control.

A more cynical assessment of the hesitation of media and politics to be critical of Islam is that that is a dangerous pursuit, as distinct from the safe fun of mocking Christianity. There is doubtless something in this, but I’m not sure that it gets to the heart of the matter. It is more that we have in the west so separated “religion” out of having a *right* in the public square that it is thoroughly confusing when it appears again with such vigour. As a society, we are not religiously aware enough to make sense of the oddity of such religious passion, and so we have to tackle it with non-religious means.

This insensitivity to religion has its source many generations ago, but it matured – if an insensitivity can “mature” – only one or two generations back. It is a peculiarly Christian phenomenon, in that it is something which has developed in those parts of the world which have been most affected by the presence and then decline of the church. Perhaps it ought not to surprise us, then, that even the church has not been much able to engage Islam on specifically religious terms.

But engagement with Islam, or any other religion or non-religion is not my particular interest this morning. I’m more interested in what has caused us as a society and, in particular, as a church, to be somewhat blind-sided by the sudden resurgence of passionate religious expression, and rather powerless to deal with it *as* a religious expression.

And this brings me to our reading this morning from 1 Corinthians. This is perhaps “*the*” church text of the Uniting Church. We are a church of many parts. Councils relate to councils, each (more or less) open to the other, calling the other to account, sharing oversight of the whole church. We are a largely de-clericalised church, with a strong emphasis on the many gifts of our many members. We are a composite church made up of ecumenical efforts which sought to take the best of each of its parent churches, and are constantly involved in ecumenical conversation. Every voice matters. In such ways

of ordering our common life we reflect the notion that it is many parts which make up the one body.

This is, of itself, not a uniquely Christian notion. The metaphor of the body for a society of interrelated members dates back at least 600 years prior to Paul, appearing in one of Aesop's fables (*The belly and the members*). But it is a particularly potent metaphor, and one which is still very much present to us today in contemporary notions of multiculturalism and social tolerance.

Because of the power of the metaphor and its continuing appeal, it comes to seem that what the church is "on about" and what western multiculturalist societies are on about are pretty much the same: a bit of everyone is good for everyone.

Just so, because church and the liberal state are on the same side on this central political tenet, the church is rendered largely irrelevant to the wider social project – a mere helper in an action which is already underway. To link this back to where we started, the church ceases to be a "religious" presence in society and is itself now one member of the larger body politic.

But if we look back to what Paul is doing in this passage, we find something rather different going on. Listen again to the first verse we heard this morning – all but the last word:

*"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..."*

What is that last word? Keeping in mind that Paul is writing to a community divided by competitiveness and economic difference and general moral confusion, the "obvious" word would seem to be "you":

*"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 you."*

"You behave as if you are many, and different, and as if the difference overrides the commonness. But as the membered body is one, so you who are many are also one."

This makes perfect sense to us, familiar as we are with the metaphor of the body for society. But Paul does not have "you" here; he has "Christ":

*"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."*

Paul writes here not of the way of being of any general community, but the way of being of Christ. He draws the closest possible link between the person of Jesus and the community of those who trust on him. As we were reminded last week, at the beginning of this chapter, Paul remarked that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit – with the historical name "Jesus" here being the important thing which is affirmed, and not the general notion of a "Christ". For the Corinthians the body was a problem, and so it was a problem that the *idea* of the Christ was linked to the historical body of Jesus. For them this seemed to tie God down too tightly to the world. Can it be that *here*, in this one place – Jesus of Nazareth – all that matters actually took place?

But Paul pushes this further. In this chapter he argues not so much that the particular human being Jesus is the Christ, but that this Christ takes the form of the historical church.

Even within the faithful church today this is almost a horrifying thing to hear. Within the church we know even better than those without how we are not Christ-like. How can it be that *here*, in this place, all that really matters takes place?

But the shock here is important. It is the possibility of a new thought – and one which accords more closely with the logic of the gospel than with modern optimistic liberal politics.

We dare not say that the church *is* “Christ,” and Paul does not either. But it *is* the *body* of Christ he describes here (12.27). Elsewhere he speaks of our being “in” Christ – enveloped, as it were, by Christ; or of the church as the bride of Christ, related in the “two-become-one” way of marriage.

The church, as much out of embarrassment before the wider world as out of piety, prefers rather to be the community of “believers”, or “followers” of Christ, with the reality which is Christ safely distant from our broken way of being. And we are believers and followers. But if in understanding ourselves in this way we imagine that we are somehow protecting God from an embarrassing relationship to the church, then we sell God short, as well as everything that we do as a church.

The tangibility of God’s presence in the world did not end with the death and resurrection of Jesus. God’s righteousness did not begin and end with Christmas and Easter. The Spirit which, in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus declared was upon him, is the same Spirit which we have been given, which joins the members of this particular body.

The question of the presence of God in the world is not, then, a merely religious one which has been pushed out of the public square with the modern irrelevance of religion and its theological disputes. If the world – or at least our particular society – is no longer interested in religion or theology, it remains very interested in politics, and just here the gospel re-asserts itself: the church is the presence of a different kind of political reality.

This is not a *perfected* political reality; we don’t have to go far to find evidence of this. But it is a reality with a particular and distinct end, or goal. That goal is the peculiar humanity of Jesus himself. This is the one thing the church celebrates, and for which it exists: to point to this way of being human as the way to which all humankind is being drawn.

And so we pray in Jesus’ name. We hear the Word which is Christ himself. We are fed and watered with the body and the blood of Jesus. And all of this by the power of same the Spirit which made his humanity the presence of God.

Christian life is not concerned with a God whose distance is the sign of his greatness. We are concerned with a God who is as close to us as we are to each other. Our is a God who can make of the most unlikely of things his presence place – even us – that the world might know God has sent the Son.

Let us, then, pray and love, that we might become ever more fully what God has created us to be: Christ’s own body, by the power of God’s own Spirit, to the glory of the Father. Amen.

\*\*\*