

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 27th January 2019
1 Corinthians 12: 12 - 31

What is the best way to change a baby's nappy? I learned six years ago that the best way to change a nappy is simply to leave the room where nappy-changing is taking place. The reason is that just because your spouse or your partner is not changing the nappy the way you change a baby's nappy, that does not mean that she is doing it wrongly. It just means she is doing differently. So, there is no need to criticise. Indeed, instead of criticising, just leave the room and let her get on with it.

Moreover, I learned that just because someone does something differently from the way that I do it, that does not mean that the person is criticising the way I do it; it just means that she is doing it differently; it's not personal.

Leave the room rather than criticise or take offence might be one of the top tips that I should give to young couples setting off on married life, particularly if they hope to build a family. In a family everyone has an equal place; not criticising other members, or taking offence yourself, might be one of the best ways to ensure family harmony.

That might be true of any family of any size or description. Take for example the family of Jewish communities living in Istanbul at the end of the 16th century. The historian Simon Schama vividly describes Jewish life in Istanbul in the 16th century in his history of Judaism called *The Story of the Jews*.

In Istanbul in the 16th century there were two Jewish communities. One was a community, the Romaniot, of Greek-speaking Jews who had been relocated to Istanbul from across the Balkans and the Levant by the Muslim Ottoman empire. Though this was a form of exile for them, they were treated well in Istanbul because they had supported the Ottomans against the Christian Byzantines when the Byzantine Empire had fallen, and Constantinople had become Istanbul.

The other Jewish community living in Istanbul at the time were the Sephardim. They were Jews from Spain – Spanish speaking of-course – and refugees fleeing the Spanish Inquisition who found a home in Istanbul under the rule of the more benign and welcoming Ottoman Empire.

These two Jewish communities lived side-by-side in Istanbul, but they brought with them different languages, so they spoke of their faith in different ways; they brought different histories – the Romaniot saw their exile as a form of continuity, the Sephardim had experienced persecution and felt deeply the loss of their lives and homes in Spain. Exile for them was a disruption. The two communities also brought with them different traditions, different marriage

ceremonies for example, different meals that they ate on the Sabbath, they baked bread in a different way.

These cultural, historical, social and religious difference caused a great deal of tension between these two Jewish communities, and they often fell out; they each felt criticised, they each judged the other. One of the main roles of their Rabbis was often the arduous task of trying to reconcile the communities to each other because, after all, they were both equal members of the one Jewish family, even if they did many things differently. Their two different histories, languages, traditions, cultures and diets, argued their religious leaders, had an equal place in Judaism.

In the first century, the city of Corinth wasn't unlike Istanbul in the 15th century. Corinth was also a multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-lingual city of different people from different places of the Roman Empire. The fledgling church that the apostle Paul had established there reflected this diverse city. When he left to establish other churches elsewhere, the community found itself struggling to live together because of the diversity of languages, cultures and histories that made up its membership.

To help this Christian community find some unity Paul wrote it a letter. We read one of the key passages from that letter this morning. In it, Paul used a metaphor by which this diverse community should understand itself.

Because we so often read superficially, it is often thought that Paul compared the Christian community to a human body, and encouraged the members of the community to see themselves as different parts of that body; for example, some were ears, some eyes and so on, but each one necessary for the proper functioning of the body.

But, that is not what he actually wrote. The reason we misunderstand today is because we do not live in a world where comparing the workings of things to a human body is as ubiquitous a metaphor as it was back in the first century. Understanding things in our world that are a mystery to us, by analogy to things that are familiar to us is commonly done in every century.

For example, in the 17th century people used hydraulics to think of how the world worked, and in the 19th century Newtonian physics meant that the world and the universe, even our brains, were understood like mechanical steam engines or telephone exchanges. Today, it is common to think of our brains, for example, as computers: a physical thing with programmes that run software. We use whatever we are familiar with to explain our world, be it hydraulics, steam engines, telephone exchanges or computers.

In the first century, when Paul was writing his letter, the prevailing metaphor for explaining the workings of the entire cosmos and human culture was the human body. Objects and people were understood as discreet parts of one

whole. At the time, this analogy suited the elite, wealthy and powerful, who often exploited this metaphor to maintain their position in society.

Inferior people and groups had to play their part for the good of the whole body. They shouldn't rock the boat, and they should accept their place in the body politic. Slaves should play their slavish part for the good of everyone, for example. They were a necessary, but certainly not an equal part.

So, when Paul chose to use this metaphor of a body in order to address the cultural and religious divisions that had grown up in this young church in Corinth, it was a very familiar metaphor. People understood it implicitly, in a way that might seem foreign to us now. Back then, people knew that they were all members of one body, after all that was how everything was understood.

But, what is distinctive about the way Paul uses the metaphor of the body was to apply it, not to the church community, but to Jesus Christ. In verse 12, the first verse we read, he wrote, "For Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body." Then he went on to say that we are the members of this one body – Christ - because we share one baptism and we all drink from the one Holy Spirit.

The radical twist he is giving to this metaphor, as he goes on to explain further, is that in all the members of this one body are equal. Every part of the body is as important as every other part. Indeed, furthermore, no one part can represent the body alone. Every part needs every other part in order to function.

His point is not that we are all members of the one body with our different parts to play. It is that we are all *equal* members of the one body and when we play our parts, and treat each other equally then, and only then – when we treat each other equally - can we say that the Church is like the body of Jesus Christ one earth.

It seems to us to be a subtle thing, but at the time it was very significant, radical and counter-cultural. In a world understood by a hierarchical metaphor of a body in which everyone was necessary, but not equal, Paul argued that Christ was like a body and he only lives when every part of that body treats the other parts equally.

Or to put it another way. The solution to the problem of how we live together is not to understand how we can be one, our unity, the radical solution to the problem of how we live together, Paul argued, is to understand that each of us has an equal value even if our gifts themselves are not equal, but diverse.

Paul is clear that there are ways of doing things and there are gifts that people have that are “higher gifts”, the highest gift of all being, as he will go on to say, the ability to love. He also goes on to say that the ability to prophecy is more important than the gift of speaking in tongues. But, his significant point in these verses is that whoever you are and whatever gifts you have – higher or lower – you are a member of the body, and by virtue of being so, you are of equal value to the body.

The church can only function in a Christ-like way, it can only be affective at building-up the Kingdom of God, it can only be distinctive in its way of life when everyone who still has a part to play, plays their part, and when members of the body, no matter what part they have to play, are equally valued members of that one body.

This past week was the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*, an ecumenical initiative over 100 years old celebrated in many places across the world, and in Edinburgh on Thursday evening with a service at Palmerston Place Church. This passage that we read suggests that any prayer for Christian unity should always be at heart a celebration of Christian diversity, because it is only when we appreciate fully the diversity that makes up the Church and value that diversity equally that the Church becomes the body of Christ.

Within individual congregations too, this passage reminds us that it is not unreasonable to recognise and appreciate that there are some roles that take up more time, are more demanding, or require more training than others. But, the principal that Paul asserts is that those who hold those roles are not more valuable to the functioning of the congregation than those who do not. The congregation is only a healthy one when those who hold the vast diversity of roles are valued equally.

In our country too, a country that has a bodily unity about it in which different members, that is different citizens, have different roles, different jobs, it is just too easy to instinctively feel that just because someone has a more demanding job, or a higher paid job, that consequently that person is of more value to the country than someone who is paid less, or is less skilled.

In our lives, in our families, in our churches, in our societies it is just too easy to value people based on the job they have, the skills they have learned, the role they play, the position they hold or the power at their disposal.

But, this reading from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth asserts a radically different way of understanding our unity. Our place isn't defined by what role we play or position we hold, our place is defined by our relationship to Jesus Christ – “For Christ is like a single body...” and the diverse community of people who have been baptised in to Christ, who have drunk of the Holy Spirit, have an equal value, no matter the importance, or significance of the

role they play in making that body, the body of Christ, a living one in the world today.