



The Incarnate Christ – God’s Hope For Community

. . . though we are many, we are one body, for we all share in the one bread.¹

One of Paul’s strongest metaphors for the church is the image of the body.² The words above are used in our liturgy as we draw near to share the bread and the wine in what we refer to as *Holy Communion*. Indeed the word *communion* shares its root meaning with the word *community* so as we share in Holy Communion we are making a powerful statement about being in community together. So far we have looked at the cosmic Christ as experienced in and throughout the cosmos – all of creation – the universal Christ; and we have looked at the affirming Christ in the experience of the individual as he becomes God’s “Yes” to each one of us as seen in the life of Mary. These two aspects of thinking about Christ help us to hold the balance between faith as individualistic, which is about me and my experience; and faith as community, which is about our corporate experience - God for us and with us in the macro and the micro realms of our human experience.

Today we consider how these two are held together through the understanding of the incarnate Christ and our relationship to him as the church. When we speak of Christ incarnate we have traditionally understood this to be making reference to God revealed in and through the body – the flesh or *sarx* as the Greek would have it. The concept of God becoming flesh is complex and has from the beginning been a theological minefield. I do not wish to delve into a detailed exploration of the complexities of what exactly we mean when we think of Jesus as God in the flesh. Rather I am more concerned about how Jesus is now experienced in an incarnational sense. I will be arguing for the recognition that the incarnation of Christ for us today is to be found in us – in and through community. It is in this sense that I am describing the incarnate Christ as God’s hope for humanity.

The Body Of Christ

The body is made up of the flesh (Greek *sarx*) – the very stuff that constitutes our physical existence. The only clear allusion to God *becoming* flesh is found in the first chapter of the gospel of John, *The Word (logos) became flesh (sarx), he lived (skeno) among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only (monogenes) Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.*³ This is a statement linking the preexistence of the wisdom of God (*logos*) as revealed in and through the birth (*monogenes*) of Jesus – the wisdom of God (*logos*) has pitched its tent (*skeno*) in the body (*sarx*) of Jesus Christ in order to be made manifest to us. Once again the claim is that we can know God in and through the person of Jesus the Christ. Once again this is a post resurrection/ascension development in the revelation of the Christ and his relationship to God and our relationship to him. We are post resurrection/ascension people and as such we live on in the tradition of the post resurrection/ascension experience of Jesus the Christ. As we have seen previously, Paul is the apostle who roots his experience of Jesus in his post resurrection/ascension vision of the glorified Christ. Paul more than likely had no experience of Jesus in the flesh and he is not present in any of the accounts of *physical* resurrection

¹ 1 Corinthians 10.17

² See also Romans 12.5; 1 Corinthians 12.27; Ephesians 1.22,23

³ John 1.14

appearances in the gospels. Neither is he present in the account of the ascension. Paul is the first truly post resurrection/ascension apostle of the faith and as such he holds that in common with us. The words of Jesus to Thomas in John's gospel are as true for Paul as they are for us today – *blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe*.⁴ It is from this experience and through his deep understanding of Jesus the Christ as the all in all that Paul develops his metaphor for the church as the body of Christ.

In Paul's writings we find that he uses two words to refer to flesh/body – they are *sarx* and *soma*. *Sarx* is the word used by John for flesh in his prologue (Chpt 1) and *soma* is the word used in the synoptic gospels in reference to the bread being the body of Christ. When referring to the gathered community as the body of Christ Paul uses *soma*. This is because he is careful to move the metaphor on into a mystical understanding and not merely a physical one. For Paul *sarx* was his word for what the New Jerusalem Bible translates as *disordered human nature* (KJV sinful flesh) – it is his word to describe humanity corrupted by sin. John on the other hand is wanting to use *sarx* to deliberately make the connection between the coming together of the divine and the human – in this sense the flesh (*disordered human nature*) is *redeemed* even as the Word (*logos*) becomes manifest in and through humanity in Christ. What Paul is saying when he uses the word *soma* in effect is that *we are the mystical body of Christ*. The prayer book reflects this in one of the post communion prayers (used in the first order) when it affirms that as we have shared in the bread and the wine as symbols of the body and blood of Christ, so we are proclaiming that *we are now the mystical body (soma) of the Christ*. A crude way of looking at this is that for John *sarx* is the medium through which God chooses to reveal himself in Christ thus beginning the redemptive journey for all of humanity. Paul simply moves that metaphor along by taking the word *soma* to be the redeemed human nature that is now the visible evidence of the invisible Christ. Therefore, we have to grasp the concept that **we** are now the Word made flesh by virtue of the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ. Christ may now be made known to the world in and through us as the church – the body of Christ.

The Body As Community

If this is the case then it becomes impossible to speak of Christ without referring to the church as the manifestation of Christ to the wider community. In this sense we become what God intended for Israel to become – the physical manifestation of the creative, redeeming will of God for the whole world – a means of blessing to the world community. The community of believers becomes the catalyst for the redemption of the community of the world – this is what it means to love our neighbour. Yes, as individuals we are welcomed into a personal experience of the redeeming love of God but ultimately that experience has to be lived out in community – *where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst (literally in the middle) of them*.⁵

Following Christ then is not merely a self-improvement strategy or an insurance policy for a secure future beyond the clouds. It is a commitment to living in community – the community of faith. *Church* is meant to be so much more than a weekly visit to a purpose built building to say our prayers or 'make our communion' or attend the mass. An hour and a half a week cannot justify naming ourselves as *church*. Neither is church defined by what it was, whilst the history of any institution is of some significance the only significance of *church* is what it is today and not what it has been in the past. When we dwell on what it used to be then we lose sight of what it could (or indeed *should*) be – if we're not careful we become trapped in a downward protective spiral of nostalgia. We have an obligation to continually assess how we can function as a community of faith for the community around us here and now. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of the Second World War, famously said that the Church is the only organisation that exists for the sake of those outside it. Sadly, the way we often see churches behaving in terms of how they organize and finance themselves this would seem to be far from the reality. Could this be the reason for the steady decline in church attendance that we have witnessed since the two world wars?

⁴ John 20.29

⁵ Matthew 18.20

To continue the incarnate presence of God as the body of Christ together we must renew our confidence in the calling and purpose of God for his church. We will also have to renew the way in which we *do* church. Paul makes it clear that we have to function as a body – as *the* body of Christ to the world – a *community* of faith. At the head of that body is Christ and every member is part of the whole and has a specific function and purpose of equal importance⁶. No one is more important than another – a Bishop or even an Archbishop is no more important than someone who faithfully arranges the flowers (and *visa versa* I would have to add). Jesus made it very clear in his own dealings with people that hierarchy was not the way the kingdom would function⁷ – instead we would function as a heterarchy⁸ making room for everyone to find a place within the whole. Commenting on how hierarchical models of church structure simply emulated the hierarchical structures of other institutions of that time Adrian B Smith says,

... Jesus proposed a different model. His idea for humanity was so radical; he was able to envisage how it could be otherwise. Sadly though, only a few years after Pentecost, Jesus' small group of followers were so unable to situate themselves in another social shape than that around them that they began to organize their converts on the pattern of the contemporary civil state And it has been evident in the church ever since.

Jesus' Kingdom vision cut right through the traditions of his culture and he challenged people - and us – to see that there is another way of ordering our relationships. Nowhere in the gospels do we find Jesus approving the hierarchy model.⁹

This is not only a reference to governance but also an indication of how we should be accepting of all people as being equally deserving of the grace of God. The distinctions and divisions that we have created in the wider church around issues of status, gender, sexuality, ability/disability or political affiliation to name a few is appalling for an organism (I use this word rather than organization) that is meant to be the visible image of the invisible Christ – the presence of God to the world. Let us remember that *God so loved the world* and as he gave Christ to the world so he has given the church to the world for the very same purpose – to demonstrate his unconditional love and offer healing and acceptance that transforms. Henri Nouwen has said,

Compassion is not an individual character trait, a personal attitude, or a special talent, but a way of living together. . . . As individuals we cannot be everything to everyone, but as a community we can indeed serve a great variety of needs. . . . The primary quality of community is a deep sense of being gathered by God¹⁰

We **are** the body of Christ and as such we will be seen to be what we are according to how we live in community. If we are perceived to be guarded and mean spirited, rejecting and judgmental then that is the image of Christ that we will project. It is a deep sadness to me that too often the visibility of the church is often hugely negative as we *snap and tear each other to pieces*¹¹ over the things that we are desperate to defend. As we understand ourselves to be the community of Christ we also need to understand that we are part of a wider community – a community that we are meant to be fully engaged with – a community in need of the affirmation of the message of Jesus. Vincent Donovan, a Roman Catholic missionary best known for the innovative work he was engaged with in Africa and author of *Christianity Rediscovered*, speaks from experience when he reflects on the baptismal ministry of the western church when he says,

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12.12ff

⁷ *I have come to serve not to be served* Mark 10.45

⁸ A heterarchy is a system of organization replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy, and/or divergent-but-coexistent patterns of relation. Heterarchies are networks of elements in which each element shares the same "horizontal" position of power and authority, each playing a theoretically equal role. (Wikipedia)

⁹ in his book *Tomorrow's Faith – a new framework of Christian belief*

¹⁰ *Compassion- A Reflection On The Christian Life* – a collaboration by Henri Nouwen, Donald McNeill & Douglas Morrison

¹¹ Galatians 5.15

... this community of Christ is just a sign of an even deeper community, the community of humankind, *for the sake of which the community of Christ is in the world*. Every activity that builds up, sustains, heals that human community is baptismal ministry. It is time for us to leave our sacramental ghetto and to go out into our neighbourhoods, our society, the world and help to restore our shattered community. Americans (*Australians?*) are amongst the loneliest people in the world, in desperate need of community.

We are the community of Christ, a people whose vocation is to be a credible witness and sign of what human community is supposed to be.¹²

In order for us to incarnate Christ to the world we will need to make some radical changes to the way we perceive ourselves and the way we structure ourselves as church. We will need to become a heterarchy and not a hierarchy – encouraging the participation and involvement of all, opening wide the doors to all without distinction or discrimination. We must recognise that what Paul says about their being neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female – for you are all one in Christ Jesus¹³ is not only true for the community of the church but also for the community of humanity. Distinctions based on discrimination as a result of fear of that which is different to what we are used to cannot be part of how we behave. The church should be the one place where difference is accepted and affirmed without attempting to normalize everything into a homogenous whole. This is how the church initially grew exponentially as all were welcomed into the community of the body of Christ. Jurgen Moltmann says,

... people who are different from us, that is, people whose thoughts, feelings, and desires are different from ours, make us feel insecure. We therefore love those who are like us and we shun those who are different from us.¹⁴

Moltmann is framing his thoughts around the example of the demonstration of God's love through the suffering of Christ in empathy with the suffering of humanity. This is the passion of Christ – passion in the sense that God is committed to loving the world. He goes on to say,

His love is passion: passion for human beings and their worth, passion for creation and its peace.¹⁵

For too long the church has been obsessed with uniformity and hierarchical authority structures. At the local level this can manifest in ways which suppress growth and fruitful change as we strive to maintain the status quo and the way we have always done things – even if we are not really sure why we have done them the way they are done. If indeed we are the body of Christ – if we are the community of faith – we are so for the sake of the wider community of humanity of which we are members also. If the incarnate Christ is God's hope for community then we have to recognise that **we** are that hope and as such we must rise to the challenge. Something I hope we are able to consider in the coming year.

¹² *The Church in the Midst of Creation*, Vincent J. Donovan

¹³ Galations 3.28

¹⁴ *The Open Church – invitation to a messianic lifestyle*, Jurgen Moltmann

¹⁵ *ibid*