**One Body: Sermon by Rosemary Sumner during One World Week 23/1/22**

In 1944, at the height of the Second Word War, J. B. Priestley wrote a play which was to become a modern classic and a permanent item on the G.C.S.E. English syllabus. That play, “An Inspector Calls”, was a brilliant morality play written as a suspenseful mystery with supernatural overtones. It concerned a mystery Inspector visiting a family and showing how each of them had contributed to the death of a girl and her unborn child. The message of the play is summed up in the Inspector’s final words, “We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.”

“One body”. 2,000 years earlier, Paul had used that metaphor or image not to describe mankind, but to describe the emerging Christian church. What an inspiration! For Paul saw the Christians as the Body of Christ and he developed this idea into something both profoundly spiritual and incredibly practical.

In I Corinthians, Paul refers to the early Christian Agape which was inspired by Jesus’ words as he handed round the bread at the last Supper, “This is my body which is for you”. Paul had to warn them to share the bread and wine with due reverence and respect and with appropriate care for one another, for some were abusing it through greed and selfishness.

Paul developed a profoundly spiritual concept of the Body of Christ. He believed that, through baptism, converts were baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ. They were now “in Christ”. Paul could do this because this concept of what we might call a corporate personality was already part of Jewish thought. All mankind were potentially “in Adam” or the first man, because his seed or sperm would start the development of the human race. Similarly, the same idea applied to the Jewish race, all descendants of Abraham. This is why Paul can say in I Corinthians 15, “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.” How profound that apparently simple statement is!

So, as each baptism candidate was submerged in water, a symbolic drowning, they “died” with Christ, and as they rose from the water, they “rose” to new life in Christ. Sadly, the practice of infant baptism has largely removed this powerful symbolism from our liturgy, leaving parents with the impression that baptism is a washing away of sin.

Do you love your body? Are you ashamed of it? Over the years, many teenagers who have been influenced by the media’s picture of bodily perfection have attempted or even achieved suicide. Paul recognised that people regard different parts of their body with more or less respect. As we grow older, our bodies deteriorate and we may try to ignore warning signs. My operation came about because I had a prolapse in the pelvic area, not something we tend to talk about. It was only because the topic came up on “Call the Midwife” that I went to see the doctor. Similarly, it was the wall of silence which allowed thousands of women to suffer agonies because of the use of mesh in operations. It was only when some started talking about it openly that it gave courage to others to relate their experiences and for the process to be discontinued.

Paul points out that we should not despise certain parts of our body because every part of our body has an important part to play in our lives. After all, even split skin on our fingers can affect us when we use our hands, or a bruised little toe can affect our mobility. Every part of our body is important to how we live our lives and should be treated with care and respect. So, when this image is applied to the church, the body of Christ in the world, Paul argues that the contribution of every Christian, however apparently unimportant it seems, is vital. Each spiritual gift to a Christian is given, not to make a person feel good or important, but for the common good of all. As the Body of Christ we should try to follow the pattern set out by Jesus in the Nazareth Synagogue to reach out to the poor and afflicted and offer freedom to those locked up in their own private hell.

The person who keeps an eye on their next door neighbour is doing just as important a job as the person who teaches or preaches. The gift of speaking in tongues and the gift of offering healing are both gifts given by the Spirit and each should be valued. Providing flowers in church may lift the spirits of those who see them and offering a warm drink and chance to chat may bring friendship into lonely lives. You may feel that you have little to offer, but you never know what effect some word or action may have had on someone else. A kind word or act may be the little seed dropped into a crevice that quietly grows and bears fruit.

Unfortunately, the opposite situation also applies. How often have we regretted a careless word or a thoughtless action, or even the chance to do a good deed which was ignored? Paul, as a fervent persecutor of the first Christians, had more in his life to regret than most Christians; but he also knew God’s forgiveness and the opportunities to try again.

Although we did not read it today, Paul’s letter does go on in chapter 13 to sum up the most important Christian values: faith, hope and love, and his final decision is that love is the most important: not slushy, sentimental feelings of love, but a practical, caring love. This is a love which does not consider putting up barriers of race or gender or social status, because God does not exclude us on these grounds and so neither should we exclude others. If we are ever tempted to do so, may we call to mind Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, who to the Jews of Jesus’ day, was a hated foreigner and a man who worshipped God differently, yet it was he who helped the wounded man; while the priestly Jews walked by on the other side. These issues of race, gender and social status are likely to be an important issue for the Church this year and we should consider them seriously in the light of Christian teaching.

This is still part of the Week for Christian Unity and we have to admit that the Body of Christ is not all one big happy family. Different churches or sects are divided from one another by different attitudes and beliefs, some quite minor, like using wine or non-alcoholic substitutes for Communion; but others quite crucial, like excluding people from church membership because they hold different views on doctrine, sexuality or ethics. However, we have moved a long way since the 1950s when I was smuggled into a RC Church to see the crib!

The Christmas Messengers repeatedly gave the encouraging words, “Do not be afraid”. However daunting the task set before us, let us remember those words and also God’s promise to Joshua as he was given the terrifying task of carrying on the work of Moses, “I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of good courage.” (Josh.1:5-6). Amen, so be it.