

## Body matters

**Matthew 16:13-20**

**Romans 12:1-8**

(from *The Message Bible*)

In a recent TV programme Dr Michael Mosely has been examining one of the side-effects of the COVID 19 Lockdown: that of putting on extra weight. The reasoning was that extreme circumstances may affect our bodies, and influence their efficient workings. As a reaction to fear, anxiety or sustained boredom, some of us overeat whilst others lose their appetite and if we want to remain healthy we need to redress this imbalance. Whether we have fallen prey to either of these conditions, we know that during these challenging times we have been forced to pay more attention to our bodies.

Just two examples. We find we have to think of the most natural, automatic bodily function, breathing, which we normally don't pay too much attention to. Now, we have to take care of how we breathe, where we are breathing, who else is nearby who may infect us, or whom we may infect unawares. So, we have to wear face coverings to limit the risks and put up with it's effects in making our breathing more difficult. We have to pay more attention to our hands – probably the most active parts of our bodies after our hearts. We work with them, we feed ourselves with them, we create beautiful things with them, we touch and caress others with them in love and friendship. Now we have been forced to almost fear them as the main possible source of infection and keep having to wash them and sanitize them all the time to prevent us from being attacked by the virus.

What does all this do to us? To have to concentrate on our bodies, which the Bible calls 'fearfully and wonderfully made' by God (Psalm 139) yet the bodies that most of the time we simply take for granted. We have several options and indeed, we may do all of them at different times. We may see our bodies as a gift, part of God's marvellous, unique creation. Beautiful in its complex workings, better than any computer, capable of renewing and healing itself, enabling us to relate to each other and to the rest of creation. We may want to give thanks for our eyes and ears and the capacity to smell, all amazingly interrelated to give us a rich life experience, and in spite of our current restrictions, still able to open up new, undiscovered vistas for us.

On the other hand, we may view our bodies, as not as beautiful as others', or as a source of temptation, discomfort and pain, making life difficult, and getting us frustrated with its limitations, something the pandemic may have aggravated out of all proportion and made us inward-looking and depressed. Or again, we may think that the appearance of our body is the most important thing about us. We judge others by how they look and often feel we are being judged by our outward appearance. In a sense our body image becomes part of our identity, which we want to protect and present to the world in the best possible light.

Today, in our second Bible reading we have heard the Apostle Paul, who gives us his understanding of the significance of the body, and warns us not to 'misinterpret ourselves' by our own standards. So, how can we accurately understand ourselves? Paul, perhaps more than anyone else in the Bible, talks a lot about the body, perhaps because, apparently, he himself had some bodily affliction that he couldn't ignore. He uses it mainly as a metaphor, but I was interested to discover that in the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to Timothy, attributed to Paul, there is some very down-to-earth advice about the physical body as well: "*Stop drinking only water; in view of your frequent ailments take a little wine to help your digestion.*" (1 Tim 5:3), perhaps a bit too much information about poor Timothy and clearly not the best biblical quote for members of Alcoholics Anonymous!

However, in our reading today from the Letter to the Romans, the body is a metaphor as well as a physical reality, and in both cases it has a corporate aspect. It is addressed to the fragmented Christian community in 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome, and maybe a teaching to us too as a current day fragmented community of the followers of Jesus Christ. Paul acknowledges all those many positive attributes of the human body we have just spoken of and affirms that they are also valid for the people of God as a whole, a community made and shaped by God.

The tough times we are going through may have made us into self-contained individuals, or very small units of twos and threes by necessity, but that should not negate our true identity as 'excellently formed and marvellously functioning parts' of the one body of Christ. You notice how the emphasis shifts from the individual body to THE BODY? It makes a difference, - now perhaps more than ever before, - how we understand ourselves, where do we find our meaning. We do give thanks for the many meaningful things we have experienced in our 'twos and threes' during the lockdown but Eugen Peterson in his (*The*) *Message Bible*, spells out the dangers graphically when he interprets Paul's words: "*as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we?*" Paul's understanding is that our Christian identity is bigger than our individual, bodily existence and that it is to do with the God we believe in.

In the light of this, when we come to our Gospel account of Peter recognising Jesus as God's own Anointed, it may be helpful to reflect on the story from Peter's point of view. A fortnight ago we were encouraged to take the spotlight off Peter and put it on Jesus. This time I would suggest we move the other way and without eclipsing Jesus, put the spotlight on Peter for a moment. Not, as a leader, founder of the Church, keeper of keys, etc. but as a struggling fellow human being, who together with the rest of us, is touched by the divine and is challenged to discover, who he really is and where he is going.

We could say that this story concerns Peter's identity as much as Jesus'. Now, that, in a moment of inspiration, Peter endows Jesus with the highest possible title in contemporary Jewish thinking, and calls him 'Messiah', what is he going to do with this extraordinary knowledge? Will it help him with his own self-understanding? Will it give *him* a changed perspective on *his* life? When suddenly he can see beyond the bodily reality of the Galilean carpenter, and recognise in him the face of God, will he see himself differently too? And will he find in his Galilean fisherman's identity the same ability to make visible something of the invisible mystery of God? For that is the implication of following this carpenter.

'And you. Who do you say that I am?' It is the question that comes to us too again and again, both as individual Christians, but more importantly as a community, a body of God's people. Wherever we are, whichever way we answer, will make a difference. If we agree with Peter, we may want to heed what Paul says. The sober estimate of ourselves will no longer be based on a self-satisfied comparison with others, but will take its cue from who our God is, and will compel us to find our place among the other parts of Christ's Body created by God. In the Body where we only make sense in our togetherness, where we may *need* others as much as we may be *needed* by others for the healthy workings of the whole. May God's Spirit be our Guide as we try to grow into our God-given identity. **Amen**

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