

Sermon

1 Corinthians 12 v1-11

Introduction.

I have a disturbing image in my mind. A virus spreading across the globe. Unseen it stealthily claims its victims. Nobody knows where it is going to break out next. Quiet, unstoppable and inevitable.

It's called Christianity.

Surprising Virus

This is how I started a sermon on 24 May 2009 – using this same passage as a text. The virus then was swine flu.

I am not sure if I would start a sermon the same way now.

The analogy is still powerful.. Christianity did spread like a virus. It did mutate.

We are all much more familiar with how viruses mutate now. We know that a variant which renders itself totally ineffective is soon forgotten. The mutations we worry about are those which make a virus better at doing its job: easier to transmit, better at attaching itself and better at overcoming the rejection it may encounter.

The gospel message is like a virus – the global church is testament to the fact. The central message of the grace of God and the Lordship of Christ is unchanged.

The Immune System

Our text from 1 Corinthians is perhaps the first learned paper we have about the immune system of the early church. Its chief defence is division – disunity – a lack of unity. Paul is desperate to overcome this natural tendency to render the gospel message ineffective.

Now I must apologise for using this analogy in which the virus – the gospel message – is a good thing and the body's natural defences bad. I tried the other way round and talk of vaccines but it doesn't work. The division – the individualism and breaking into factions – is a very natural reaction. It is human nature. Church nature we might say.

The Letter

Paul's letters can sometimes read a bit like the rather badly written or translated instruction manual for a tumble drier. "Do this – wait for that – then do something else." A rather clunky set of instructions.

What makes it worse is misunderstanding the context. Now use your badly If you use your badly worded tumble drier instructions to start your lawn mower you really will fail.

When we look at 1 Cor 12 verses 1-11 we need to be careful.

Arrogant Church

Paul is writing to a church plagued with arrogance. A church in a culture which the was specific view of spirituality. A pagan view. The world was at the mercy of demonic spiritual forces.

It was rather trendy to be spiritual. To have religious experiences. It was part of the culture. People believed in these things.

There was a race to be more spiritual than your neighbour in an age before luxury kitchens and concrete block driveways.

The church in Corinth led this race.

Obstacle

This was a disaster.

It made the church just one of many groups behaving this way. If you were part of the race you wanted to win. If you were not, you branded all contestants as bad as each other.

Worse still if you were in the church you were competing with your fellow Christians.

Paul's letter is not primarily about spiritual gifts - but they do come into it. It is about matters spiritual. "Let's talk about the spirituality thing" would be a good title.

Lord

Paul's line of attack is this. "I have seen the HS deliver only one message: Jesus is Lord. Those under the influence of the HS should have a burning desire to declare Jesus as Lord.

Embrace it and become infected with the grace of God. Try and out-do each other and you are clearly part of the immune system. Make up your minds.

Unity and Community

Why? Because the kingdom of God is brought about by the corporate effect of the spirit not by individuals who have attained an extraordinary level of spirituality.

That is the way God works.

The corporate response, not the individual response, is what ultimately matters. It is an interesting word to use – corporate – because Paul does go on to describe the church as the body of Christ in another well-known passage.

The Workings

How does this work?

How can it be that no matter how diverse the people are who land in a church they work together and become a model Christian community?

The Engine

Perhaps the most important verse here is verse 4: “There are different kinds of gifts but the same spirit”.

Paul teases out ideas which continue beyond where our reading left off so you will have to forgive me for quoting some verses we had not reached.

There are four ideas.

Idea 1

One Spirit but different kinds of gifts. This is not. “we all fit together to make one body”. It is the opposite. God has been split up to make us.

Verse 11 says we are all the work of one and the same Spirit. This is not a rally call for unity. It is a statement that God has been **apportioned** in us.

Idea 2.

The second idea is about service – who your master is.

Early in my career I used to have to proof-read technical manuals. “The clamp circuit serves to protect the unit from an over-voltage state”. Very dull. The

expression “serves to” is key. It means, “if you are wondering why it is here, this is its job.”

This is the more familiar body analogy. Verse 24: “ God has **assembled** the members of the body”. Expertly put together.

Idea 3

The third one is another aspect of service.

When writing job descriptions for a senior role I used to add a section on the interfaces. “You will be working for A, your peers will be B and C and your team will be D,E and F. No functional description covers these details.

V18. “God has **arranged** the parts.” God is as interested in how we work together than what we achieve as individuals.

Idea 4

And the fourth idea is articulated more clearly in verse 28.

“And in the church God has appointed first of all Apostles, second prophets, third teachers. “

The church did not come from Ikea. It is not a set of parts which miraculously fit together. God is actively involved in how the parts go together. He **appoints**.

Four ideas, not three. I have broken the rules of Anglican preaching. But they do all begin with the same letter. **Apportioned, assembled, arranged and appointed.**

Does this mean the job of the HS is to disassemble God and recreate him in the church to advance his Kingdom? It is not perfect, but a good summary.

The gifts.

Apologies. I have almost finished and I have yet to get on to Spiritual Gifts which this passage is famous for.

Paul only begins to touch on gifts of the spirit in our reading in verse 7 to 11. There are similar lists in Romans, Ephesians and 1 Peter. I wanted to focus on verses 1 to 6.

David Prior in his commentary states: *“To be truly spiritual drives a person neither to extasy nor to individualism nor to other worldliness, but into the life of the local church as an expression of his or her personal commitment to Jesus as Lord and to his body here on earth”.*

Virus

Back to our virus analogy. Paul’s message to the church in Corinth is let the Holy Spirit mutate to infect you as individuals and a church to create a community of

faith, working to bring about God's kingdom.
Resistance is futile so stop trying.

St Mary's

Our advertising for a new rector is going well. Despite asking for someone who can leap tall buildings and walk on water we have several applicants. Whatever amazing talents and gifts our new rector has, the Holy Spirit will change them. That is how the Holy Spirit works. The processes of apportioning, assembling, arranging follow any appointment. They never stop.

We all will change too. Any change is good if the central message of the Grace of God and the Lordship of Christ is unchanged. That is the job of our community.

As we reflect at this time of Lent, we should pray for our new rector, whoever she – or maybe he – is and also for ourselves.

For 2000 years the church has been spreading the gospel message, infecting all who encounter it. May we as individuals and as St Mary's be part of that infection and not the immune reaction.

Amen