

We are still getting used to the idea of being grandparents. Watching a young child develop, watching him begin to explore the world around him by touch, by taste, begin to learn to coordinate movements, to manipulate, to begin to move, to roll, to crawl, to experiment with sounds – with all this the signs of frustration, of distress or just plain annoyance when things do not work out.

It is this image of a growing, developing body, vulnerable, weak yet full of potential, full of energy that came to my mind as I read the portion appointed for the Epistle today, a continuation of our reading of 1st Corinthians chapter 12 that we began last week. Paul continues to speak of the Church in terms of a body as he also reflects on the variety of spiritual gifts as experienced in the corporate and individual lives of the Church.

Very often our Body Image of the Church is something inherently static, unchanging. But we forget that a body, unless it is laid out in a mortuary, is a living thing. At all stages in life, we think, we reflect, we have the potential to learn new skills; experiences of life give us resources of insight, of wisdom that we can share with others just as we can draw on the insights of others.

Going back to the image of the child and setting it alongside the Gospel injunction, ‘Except you become like a little child’; The child learns skills, but not in isolation but in the context of family. Ryan’s Mum and Dad will teach language, will encourage those early movements from crawling, to walking, running, climbing, cycling. He will learn to feed himself, dress himself. But in addition to these basic tasks, parents help their children to discover innate gifts, creativity, sports, talents in particular subjects, in particular skills and so help their child to develop, to find fulfilment. The child will also be guided in develop social skills, what it means to live in community as they relate to other members of the family and wider society, discover their sexuality as they discover and enter into relationships.

What I am coming to is that every stage in life, our body, our personality is a work in progress.

Returning to the passage itself, the image of the body as applied to the Church is an illustration of variety and interdependence, of unity. No one part of the body defines the whole body, each part of the body is dependant on the rest for its health and wellbeing. We know from our own experience how deficiencies in our own body can impact on our own well being. I am very short sighted and don't have a great sense of balance or hand to eye coordination – that places limitations on some of the things I can do – the family always derives great amusement from my attempts at ice skating.

The way Paul employs the body analogy provides a balance to the hierarchical understanding of the Church that is so much part of our thinking. There are people called to particular positions within the Church. I think of our Archbishop, men and women struggling with the idea of vocation. But this is only part of the total ministry of the Church and can only be understood in the context of service and the building up of the whole body. Within the life of any Parish there are those with particular gifts, of music, of administrative skills, of teaching – again these can only be seen in terms of service, of building up the whole body. Even these do not tell the whole story of the ministry of the Church. For everyone has their own particular gifts to offer, gifts of compassion, or encouragement, of listening, of simple presence that each in their own way supports and sustains the whole body. People can be very diffident about the value and worth of their own particular contribution to the life of the Church. Paul's use of the analogy of the body emphasises that every part is important, every part has a purpose. If anyone is not here, our worship is diminished; if anyone holds back their gift the vitality of the Church is diminished.

Going back to this idea of the body as being at all times a work in progress, the Church is at all times living, growing, developing, learning. Just as parents, as they watch their

children grow and develop, encourage their children to identify and develop their particular skills and capabilities, so we, as members of the Church, are called to a ministry of encouragement of each other. For me, the Sunday before Christmas presented a wonderful illustration of this whole idea of identifying, encouraging celebrating each others gifts and talents in the service of God and his Church.. The Nativity in the morning, involving a number of adults in the cast, the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols in the evening, involving a record number of children in the choir provided an opportunity for us, as we celebrated the gift of God to us all of his Son, to celebrate the range of gifts and insights in the Church. Different people will have had different preferences – that is hardly surprising because we are all different and life would be very dull if we were not. But we all need each other.

There is one feature of the body that Paul does not mention and that is the interconnecting tissue – the skin, the sinews, the nerves, the blood vessels – that which holds the whole thing together. As Paul implies in the text, differences can give rise to rivalry, jockeying for position, for prominence. We are called in all our diversity to an over arching love for one another, an understanding, a forbearance, an encouragement of one another. That we can encounter and serve Christ in one another and together go out into the world in the name of Christ with our many and varied gifts into the many and varied places God places us this week.