

## The Third Sunday of Epiphany 2025

*St Mary and St Peter, Tidenham, and St Luke, Tutshill*

*1 Cor 12:12-31a*

*Luke 4: 14-21*

‘If all were a single member, where would the body be?’

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I remember a particularly hysterical Sunday evening spent with the church youth group in this very parish where I grew up. I was I suppose about 15 or 16 and one of about eight or ten young people who used to gather on Sunday evenings for social activities and Christian teaching in the living room of our then youth leader – lots of you remember Janice I’m sure. We were looking at today’s first reading from Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth and Janice had managed to hold the group together pretty well and keep us on track until we got to the verse: “if the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” And at the thought of an enormous globulous eye charging about not being able to hear anything, or a huge human-sized ear crashing into the furniture because it can’t see what’s going on I’m afraid even seemingly mature 15 and 16-year-olds regressed quite impressively and doubled up with laughter on the floor of Janice’s living room.

We then started drawing what we imagined these Corinthian Christians might look like, over here an enormous foot giving a good swift kick to a nose-shaped Christian over here that, because it’s a nose, can’t see the foot aiming for it.

Actually of course, display of immaturity aside, we had got the point of what St Paul was saying precisely. We might not have been articulating theology in a particularly grown-up manner, but we had sensed instantly the ridicule in Paul’s language. Paul is trying to explain to his rather complicated congregation in Corinth, who seem to be really struggling quite hard to work out what it might be to be a church, that unity is not at all the same as uniformity. God does not call us to be a great army of feet, or a... I don’t know what the collective noun is for lots and lots of ears, but he doesn’t call us to be that either.

‘If all were a single member, where would the body be.’ We’ve just completed another Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and we are still in the season of Epiphany. This season where we focus on the revelation of Christ in the world. Christ who is made flesh locally at Christmas, and then that vision becomes international at the Epiphany. Then at the Baptism of Christ two weeks ago we realise that this is someone to whom we must listen. Last week the wedding at Cana reminded us, as James preached, that this is a Christ of transformation. Christ who would redden the water of our hearts and faiths into wine. And today, on the Third Sunday of Epiphany, as part of this season of revelation, we learn something important about the nature of Christ’s body. After Paul has expanded on this splendid metaphor of the nonsense of one bit of our body denying the importance of another bit simply because it’s different, he delivers his knock-out blow: ‘now you are body of Christ and individually members of it.’

The Church of God is not primarily an organisation, or a fraternity, or a club. It is a body. Interconnected and interdependent and one whole thing. And even more extraordinary than that, the Church of God is *Christ’s* body. And it’s just worth pondering that. We use the phrase almost without thinking about it. We are the body of Christ, and each of us

individually members of it. And that applies at almost any geographical level. We, the members of this congregation are the body of Christ—each with our own gifts, each utterly dependent upon each other. Diminished when one of us is absent, hurting when one of us is in pain. Required to treat each other with respect, and gentleness, and to rejoice in our difference rather than being threatened by it. But that applies also to the three parishes, and five congregations of our united benefice. *St Luke's, Tutshill/St Mary and St Peter, Tidenham* is part of the body of Christ because so is St Michael, Chase; and Hewelsfield, and St B. Our strength is utterly dependent on the other parts of the body, in whom we must rejoice, for whom we must pray, from whom we can learn even, perhaps especially, when they feel rather different to us. Things go wrong, dis-ease, literally disease, slips in, when we fail to recognise our fellow members. My brain has literally said my left arm and my left leg, I have no need of you. And you can see the result. It's not great. The same thing can happen to churches.

None of which is to say we need to be identical to each other. We absolutely don't. Unity is not same thing as uniformity. Our complimentary nature is what makes us not all eyes. Not all ears. Geoff Lucas the evangelical preacher famously said years ago that if you been part of the church six months and no one's made you mad you should leave it immediately because you're in a cult. But we navigate our disagreements, we hold our relationships by remembering that we are a body, not a club. A living sacrament of Christ, not an organisation. And if you think about the other place where we encounter the body of Christ most particularly, it is at the altar. And think about the way in which we carefully put our hand out to cradle Christ when we receive him in Holy Communion: well, it is with that same care and love that we should cradle each other. St Benedict famously said that we ought to treat everything as if it were a sacred

vessel of the altar. And that's never more true than with each other.

And if we ask ourselves, well, how are we to do that? How we make, of a group of individual human beings, each with our own particular pet peeves and favourite things, our own preferences and skills and weaknesses, how do we make of this group of people the body of Christ—well we find the answer in our gospel reading. Those wonderful words of St Luke: 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him.' Like a compass constantly pointing north, our lives, our hearts, the eyes of faith, ought to constantly be fixed upon Christ. That is the way in which we form his body, rather than something less than that, like an organisation, fraternity, or club. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him. Waiting, waiting for him to speak. Just so for us. We gather as his body, fix our eyes upon him, and then wait for his voice.

Origen of Alexandria, the great third century theologian said this, in a sermon he was preaching on this passage: 'here too, in *this* synagogue, that is in this present assembly, you too can at this very moment fix your eyes upon your Saviour if you wish. Whenever you direct your inward gaze towards wisdom and truth and the contemplation of God's only Son, then your eyes are fixed on Jesus.'

Wisdom, truth, and the contemplation of God's only Son. Those might not be bad aspirations for each member of the body of Christ. If we comport ourselves, one to another, with the aim of doing so in wisdom, truth, and in the contemplation of Christ, we might nudge nearer to that vision of St Paul of the body that suffers and rejoices together. And certainly people will notice that, and want to know why.

I imagine that a number of people will be preaching about Donald Trump today, and the sermon preached to him, or perhaps at him, by Bishop Mariann Edgar Budd on the day after his inauguration. I'm not going to do that, though if you haven't watched it I urge you to do so. The closing lines, which seem to have delighted many and infuriated some, are about mercy. And are about the fact that we belong one to another. That we are connected. That suffering is never entirely individual. That we can build up the body, or we can hurt it.

'Now, you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.' When the body is united, and fixes its eyes upon Christ there is revelation, not just for the members, but so, too, all those around us. Because people will begin to say, those people are Christians. I wonder why they shine. Here is Origen again: 'I long for all of you... to have your eyes, not those of the body but of the soul, turned towards Jesus! When you look at Jesus your own faces will become radiant with his reflected glory.'

Amen.