

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
St Simon of Cyrene - Parkwood
‘Growing up as members into Christ our Head’
5 July 2009

Psalm 89:21-38

Eph 4:1-16

Mark 6:1-6 (Readings taken from the Good News Bible.)

May I speak in the name of God – who is Father of us all, and calls us into membership of the body of Jesus Christ his Son, by the power of his Spirit.

Dear people of St Simon’s, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let me say again what a pleasure it is to be with you this morning, as you celebrate your Patronal Festival.

It is a particular privilege to be asked to set the scene for your series of Sundays considering the letter to the Ephesians.

It is a wonderfully comprehensive account of the heart of what it is to be a Christian, and to receive all the blessings that our God has in store for us: blessings which, the letter tells us, he intended for us to enjoy, from the very beginning of time, from before the foundation of the world!

It is a letter unlike most others that we find in the new Testament – especially those of St Paul.

In general, St Paul writes to address a particular issue, or answer a specific question.

Reading his letters is sometimes like listening to one half of a telephone conversation, as we have to guess at what is happening at the other end of the line!

This letter, in contrast, gives a broad and balanced description of the fulness of our faith.

And, unlike other letters, it does not contain all sorts of personal messages to particular individuals.

Some people have therefore questioned whether it is written by St Paul at all.

To be honest, we do not know with certainty – and I doubt we ever shall.

But the answer that is usually given is that what we find here is in total accordance with what we know is definitely written by St Paul.

And therefore the reason why there is a slightly different style may be that this letter has a different purpose.

It may well have been a circular letter, sent not only to the Church at Ephesus, but also repeated to many other churches.

Who knows – a copy may even have gone to Cyrene! For we do know that Simon of Cyrene's sons, Alexander and Rufus, were part of the Christian community.

This is a general teaching letter – a sort of 'Christianity 101' – a basic, yet comprehensive, guide, to the Christian faith.

It is written so that the readers – or, more likely, those who heard it read aloud – could have a better grasp of the wonders of God's eternal purposes and grace; and so go on to have a deeper understanding of the particular calling he has for those who follow him.

My prayer is that in the coming weeks, you too may come to have a better grasp of the wonders of God's eternal purposes and grace; and that you also may go on to have a deeper understanding of the call he has for you, as you seek to follow him, here in Parkwood.

The theme that runs through the whole letter is that Jesus Christ is the head of everything!

At the beginning of the letter, in Chapter 1, St Paul speaks about God's plan – his 'plan .. to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head.'

And the wonderful thing is that we are called to be part of that plan!

Every one of us is called, personally and individually, by God, to become a member of the body of Christ, and so, as St Paul said in our reading today, to 'grow up in every way to Christ, who is the head'.

This is our destiny – and so it is right that this also is the theme of your sermon series.

The image of the church as the body of Christ is such a powerful one for us.

It reminds us how much we are all one.

It remind us how God creates each of us different and unique.

It reminds us of our calling to service.

First, then, is how much we are one.

St Paul says ‘There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all.’

But just as God is one, yet Father, Son and Holy Spirit – united, but not uniform – of one mind, one substance, but nonetheless three distinct persons, so we too are called to be united, but not uniform; of one mind, and yet distinct in our individuality.

For a body, a human body, is a complex creation – with arms and legs, skin and bones – many different parts, each necessary, but each different.

And this is my second theme - God creates each of us different and unique.

And because we are different, unity is a challenge!

Perhaps, as Christians, sharing in one faith, we think we should all be the same, and agree on everything!

St Paul realises that life is more complicated than this – and God has made it this way on purpose!

He also talks about what it means to be members of one body in the first letter to the Corinthians.

Here he points out how different eyes and ears are. An eye cannot hear – indeed, the whole concept of hearing is incomprehensible to the eye. And the whole concept of seeing is incomprehensible to the ear!

But nonetheless, a fully functioning body needs both – and more than that, it needs the eye and the ear to coordinate, and work together, no matter how different they are!

This is quite a challenge for us, with our human differences.

And yet God deliberately makes each of us unique!

Look around! We all look different (unless there are any identical twins here today!)

But more than this, we have different personalities, different characters, different preferences.

Some like Michael Jackson. Some like Beethoven. Some like Eminem. Some like Mohammed Ibrahim.

We are from different generations. And we know how difficult it can be to see eye to eye when there is a great age gap!

We have different experiences, different abilities.

Some are good at singing. Some are good at keeping the accounts. Some are good at public speaking and organising. Some are better at keeping things running behind the scenes.

If everyone was good at fixing the roof, who would sit with the sick?

If everyone was good at preaching sermons, who would make the lunch? (And may I say thank you in advance to all those who have laboured over this 'Christmas in July' to which we are looking forward!)

Yet the church needs everyone – with all our differences.

As St Paul says, in this reading, 'Each one has received a special gift in proportion to what Christ has given.'

Now there's an amazing thought!

God has something special for each one of you – a gift he gives you, so you can make your own, unique and vital, contribution to the life of the church.

It is as though he makes each one of you like a piece in a jigsaw.

And unless every piece is there, alongside all the other pieces, the picture is incomplete.

This is why we each of us must 'put our hand up and step up'.

And this is why we must each encourage everyone else to put up their hands and step up.

No one is more important, or less important, than anyone else.

God says – every one of you is special, and necessary! For to be the body of Christ, you must have every single part. There is no-one we can do without!

And yet we do not always find it easy to get along, with all our differences.

This is why St Paul says, 'Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another.'

Yes, be tolerant – and remember, as you look at one another, that God loves each of you, and has called each of you, and has a special task for each of you to play, within the community of St Simon's of Cyrene.

St Paul also says 'Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together.'

The way we handle our differences should not be by arguing about who is right – but by letting the peace that is God's gift, bind us together.

It is indeed a 'peace that passes all understanding', because it is bigger than all our differences.

For, sharing in one Lord, one baptism, one faith, one Spirit, one hope – being members together of the one body of Christ – we know that what we have in common, is far greater than any of our differences.

And therefore we can live and share together with optimism and confidence.

For it is God who brings us together, and holds us together. All this is his responsibility.

As St Paul also said in this morning's reading, 'Under Christ's control, all the different parts of the body fit together, and the whole body is held together by every joint with which it is provided. So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love.'

Finally, let me turn to my third theme – which is the call to service.

As St Paul says, 'He did this' – that is, God called us, and gave each of us our different gifts and skills and experiences and abilities – 'he did this to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service, to build up the body of Christ.'

Yes, as we say also in the confirmation service, God calls us, not only to a life of worship and witness, but also to a life of service – of the church, and of the communities around us.

'Love your neighbour as yourself' he said – and challenges us to see every person whom we encounter each day, as a neighbour with whom to share the love that he has for us.

So, as, in the coming weeks, you study this letter – keep this question in mind. It is a question I asked in the Charge at my own service of installation at St George's Cathedral in March last year, and it is a question to which I continue to return – both for my own ministry as Archbishop, and for the life of the Dioceses and the whole Province of Southern Africa.

The question is this:

'What is it to be the body of Christ in our time, and who God is in Jesus Christ, for us here and now?'

I know that Parkwood can be a very challenging place to live. There are so many people who need to experience Christ's compassionate touch, Christ's healing and wholeness, Christ's forgiveness, Christ's new start, Christ's comfort, Christ's strength, Christ's encouragement, Christ's limitless love and abundant life.

How are you to be the body of Christ in this place – as you 'Grow up as members into Christ our Head'?

So ponder this question in your hearts, as the weeks ahead unfold.

And let me end with that same prayer for you I mentioned near the beginning of this sermon:

My prayer is that in the coming weeks, you too may come to have a better grasp of the wonders of God's eternal purposes and grace; and that you also may go on to have a deeper understanding of the call he has for you, as you seek to follow him, here in Parkwood.

May he bless you, and make you a blessing to the community around you.

Amen