

You are the Body of Christ

A Sermon given by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Geoff Peddle at the Opening Service of the Twentieth-Eighth Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador, May 23, 2014

It is a privilege tonight to deliver this sermon in this Cathedral of St John the Baptist, the Mother Church of our Diocese, at the very beginning of our Twenty-Eighth Diocesan Synod and my first as Diocesan Bishop. It is gratifying for me to see this great building filled with worshippers as we gather in thanksgiving and in expectation. The theme of our synod this year is “You are the Body of Christ” and that diverse Body, manifested in our Church, has now gathered. Tonight and tomorrow delegates and observers from Labrador and from Newfoundland, from outports and from cities, from coastal communities and from inland communities representing every age group, and every station in life, are here. And we are here as the Body of Christ.

We gather in thanksgiving for our common life and faith in Jesus Christ, acknowledging the ministry of our Church over more than 300 years in Newfoundland and Labrador. I borrow from my words of tomorrow morning when I speak of where that 300-year-journey has brought us. Historically, we have always been a church of the people, a pastoral church that invites people to draw close and walks with them, providing places of worship and care. We still are. And as we pause to look back over that journey, we give thanks for the ministry of our most recent episcopal leader, the Right Reverend Cyrus Pitman, who served as our Diocesan Bishop for nine years until January past.

But we don’t just gather in thanksgiving; we also gather tonight in expectation with Members of Synod, Clergy, families, friends, supporters, and other worshippers seeking God’s blessing upon our work tonight and tomorrow. The word, “synod” comes from a Greek word meaning “assembly” or “meeting” and in this Synod we come together to take counsel for our Church. We pray that God’s Spirit will inspire this gathering to rise to new challenges with a renewed energy for service as the Body of Christ.

The theme for our synod is borrowed from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12) and we will reflect deeply upon what it means to be Christ’s Body in the world. St Paul teaches that through baptism we become one body with Christ as our head, calling every member into discipleship and ministry. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul uses that marvelous illustration of the Church being like a human body with different parts having different functions. “There are many parts, but one body” ... and you, the Church ... “are the Body of Christ.” The Prayer attributed to St Teresa of Avila (although it may not have been written by her) captures this well:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world ...
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

It is important that we understand not only *who* we are, but also *whose* we are. The whole Church is the Body of Christ, composed of many parts, of which this gathering tonight is but one ...

Our Synod is also part of a wider association extending in two directions in the world. Beyond our local Church here we are linked to the Anglican Church of Canada through our Ecclesiastical Province and from there to the wider Anglican Communion. That is why in our prayers on Sundays and at other times we pray not only for our own Diocese and Bishop but also for our Metropolitan and Primate, all the way to the Archbishop of Canterbury. This is also an ecumenical age and we often include in our prayers other churches not of our own denomination that we recognize as fellow Christians. So the links to this synod extend widely outward from here.

Those links also extend inward to our own three Archdeaconries and 35 parishes and 84 congregations, plus other ministries and chaplaincies in places like hospitals and our university and our prison. In fact, the links from this synod extend within to at least 33,000 persons because that is the number of identifiable members in this diocese today. And those are just the people we can identify. What about all those who avail of our ministries whom we cannot precisely name? And yet, in Christ, we are all part of the one body. I quote from the famous hymn that sings of this unity, a hymn inspired by St Paul's letter to the Galatians (3:28) in which he casts a powerful vision of a community transcending all differences in Christ: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

*In Christ there is no East or West,
in him no South or North,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.*

*Join hands, disciples of the faith,
whate'er your race may be!
Who serves my Father as a son
is surely kin to me.*

*In him shall true hearts everywhere
their high communion find,
his service is the golden cord
close-binding all mankind.*

*In Christ now meet both East and West,
in him meet South and North,
all Christly souls are one in him,
throughout the whole wide earth.*

Within our community we do well to be vigilant for those who belong but are not always very visible. As welcoming and affirming as our church is, there are those who are not always included as strongly as they should. I suggest to you tonight that our children and our youth and our young families are such a grouping. In my talk tomorrow morning you will hear much, much more about this but I believe we have a tremendous amount of work to do when it comes to the younger generations among us. Tonight I challenge this Diocese to enable Youth to move beyond the token roles that we have traditionally ascribed to them. I am announcing tonight a new initiative for our Diocese and indeed for the Anglican Church of Canada to be called the **Bishop's Challenge to Youth**. It is designed for the Youth of our Church, of other churches, and of no church, enabling them to come together in service and fellowship, and to even earn volunteer hours with our Diocese and other partners. It will connect Youth with things that are meaningful for them, and the structure will be adaptable to their local situations. There will be an annual gathering with the Bishop. There will be levels of participation and recognition of achievement. It will be a challenge to our Youth to live their faith; to make a difference in

their communities; to be the Church in the World! It is also a challenge to this Diocese to embrace the God-given treasure we have in our young people. Canon Donna Ronan, our new Canon for Children and Youth, will oversee the development of this program over the next year. Donna and I invite the Youth Delegates to Synod to join us during lunch tomorrow to begin that process.

Which brings me to still another part of the Body of Christ. Tonight we will also formally recognize and install the new Cathedral Chapter for our Diocese: our Canons and Archdeacons appointed to various ministries over the next three years. It is my desire that this Chapter act as both a unifying and progressive body within our church so that together we may move our faith community a little closer to the Kingdom of God. As a Chapter, they will provide for me as Bishop, a council of persons to discuss matters crucial for our church. They are not a decision-making body but their influence and counsel will determine many of my own decisions and those of our Diocese in the coming years. They will have a have key role in the development of policies.

But with all my talk of the Church as the Body of Christ – talk inspired by St. Paul’s words to the Corinthians – you may be forgiven for thinking that simply knowing that we are part of one body in Christ is enough. But it isn’t. And it isn’t because of the way St. Paul ends the 12th Chapter of his letter to the people of Corinth:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts ... [and suddenly Paul shifts the entire epistle onto a different level with words that send shivers down my spine] And yet I will show you a still more excellent way.

And yet I will show you a still more excellent way. After all his discussion of the Church as the Body of Christ, after listing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Paul states clearly that even that is not enough to know. For there is something even more important to know, something even more important to believe, as if all that came before was just a prelude to what is now to follow. And then Paul begins the 13th Chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

After all of his teaching on the Church as the Body of Christ; after all of his teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit; after all of his counsel over 12 chapters to the people of Corinth, St Paul says that if you don't have love you have nothing. All else will pass away but love will endure. And some people think that this chapter is just about marriage! In fact, it is about the very essence of the community into which God has called us. Only love should define that community – the Body of Christ – the Church in the world. If we are truly to be the Body of Christ in the world we must become Christ-like in our life and in our service *and especially in our love*. In these two chapters St Paul moves from describing what we are – the Body of Christ – to describing how we are to be. If the Church is the Body of Christ, the beating heart of that body must be Christ's love. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once stated, the Church is where Christ is.

But becoming the Body of Christ in all ways does not happen instantly. In a sense, in this life, we are always becoming and never fully become. That is where formation must happen and historically, the Church has understood this formation into “the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4.13) as a growing participation in Christ's wisdom and love through study, worship, prayer and service. Formation is about receiving the knowledge and wisdom to love God, neighbour and self properly through our discipleship and ministry.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us seek to grow more fully into that full stature of Christ.

Let us be disciples of Christ and ministers to one another.

May we seek God's glory in all that we say and all that we do.

Amen.