

Incarnation - 18th April 2021

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[0 : 00] Hey everyone, my name's Matt, the Vigorous St Johns, and an oh so warm welcome to this week 57 of our Sunday sessions, 57 Heinz varieties if you like, as together we've covered a fair bit of varied ground over this past year and more.

The same is true for our younger ones, and Lottie's back with another Sunday Stars session this week exploring what it means to be the body of Christ. That's a topic we'll be getting to grips with here as well, but before then, let's take stock with God and place all that we're about well and truly into those holiest of hands.

Indeed, I don't know how this week's been for you. The pub gardens are open and the weather's been pretty kind as well, so some welcome relaxation for those so reclined.

In fact, whether you've indulged in some retail therapy, taken a chance to get out and about more, or finally had your Rapunzel locks chopped off, there's definitely a growing sense that the windows of our lives are being cleaned in order to let more light in.

Yes, we know as always it's a mixed picture. Our lived experience will be as differing as ever depending on our circumstances, but appreciation of what others, even if not ourselves, are able to enjoy is a positive feature to foster.

[1 : 34] And so God, we're grateful for the lift this week has given to folks that we're making progress in reclaiming community life. We're grateful for those we already have or are hoping to meet up with again soon, for friends, for families, for fellow travellers on this winding road.

Most of all, God, we want to say we're grateful to you for your love for us. It may not always be as uppermost in our mind as perhaps it could be, but when we take time to recall and reflect again on just how amazing your provision is for us, that sense of gratitude, of being appreciative even of the smallest of things in life, well that shapes our whole approach to the days which lie before us.

So keep us on track with you, please. Keep us seeking your peace. Finding the joy. Identifying the myriad of ways in which we can be grateful.

Working out how to love our neighbours as ourselves with the love which you first lavish on us. And so dust us down and set us right today, we pray.

That our minds, our bodies, our spirits may be captivated by your goodness. The goodness of life which we'll seek to explore with you further now.

[3 : 06] Thank you, God. Amen. Okie-cokie, let's fling open the curtains of what we're going to be looking at today.

Because as we continue in this post-Easter season of resurrection-flavoured reflections, it'd be good to see what light God might shed for us on the whole topic of Jesus' incarnation.

The way in which Jesus is embodied or made flesh among us. The incarnation of Jesus coming to be God with us is one of, if not the, unique factor in our faith.

Jesus, if you like, is the ultimate player-manager. The CEO on the shop floor. The landlord who sits with their punters and has a pint.

The royalty who roughs it with the rest of us. And as we celebrate each Christmas, and as we wonder at the implications of this truth all year round, I find it mind-blowing that God comes to be with us, literally, in the body of Jesus.

[4 : 17] We might say, the body of Christ. Indeed, I've said this before, but it's worth repeating. In that since Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God, whenever we see Jesus in action, we're seeing God in action.

There is no distinction, no difference. So if we want to know who God is, we look to Jesus. And the flip side is also true though.

So if our ideas of who God is don't match with who Jesus is, then our ideas of who God is need to be adjusted and rethought in line with Jesus.

Jesus helps us to sink our minds with the mind of God, knowing God's character, God's ways, God's priorities. I mean, no wonder Jesus was so magnetic, so captivating for those early followers.

Because if you were his disciple, well, when Jesus broke bread with you, it was God breaking bread with you. When Jesus shook your hand or patted you on the back or ruffled your hair, it was God physically engaging with you.

[5 : 39] When Jesus looked you in the eye, spoke to you by name, gave you his opinion, cracked a joke in your presence, it was God communicating directly with you.

I mean, what a privilege. But this physicality of Jesus, this embodied, in the flesh Jesus, what is crucial to our understanding of who God is and how God operates, a God who gets stuck in, who's earthy, who's grounded, who's one of us.

And that's why Jesus' physical death and resurrection has such power, because it's God voluntarily embracing death and all that that means, before rising to new life, since you can't keep a good God down.

It really is the greatest story ever told, a story which, amazingly, we're invited to be a part of. You see, on one level, we can see the incarnation as being the physical, living, breathing body of Jesus, the literal body of Christ, we might say.

And yet Jesus himself expands on that understanding by sharing his presence and his authority with us.

[7 : 07] So, for example, in Jesus' conversation with Peter at Caesarea Philippi, an episode we looked at in a session at the end of January, Jesus says this, That is quite the responsibility.

It's a delegated authority in which, as we saw last week, a flawed fisherman like Peter is given the right to represent the will of God, to bind or loose, to bless or to withhold blessing.

It's incredible when you think about it. Now, we could argue, well, Peter was a special case, and that's why he's sometimes reckoned to be the geezer who greets us at the pearly gates, and so on.

But elsewhere, Jesus delegates a similar kind of authority, not just to Peter, but to all of the disciples. So, here's another passage, again, one we've looked at recently, when the risen Jesus appears to the disciples on Easter Sunday night.

Jesus said, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that, he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 50] If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. Jesus says the disciples, and therefore by implication us, hold people's forgiveness in our hands.

You know, so often I hear Christians bang on about salvation and how we're all sinners in need of God's forgiveness, and that may be true. But here, it's Jesus' followers.

It's us. It's you and me, to whom Jesus gives the authority to forgive. If we forgive others, they are forgiven, says Jesus.

And so again, what a weighty, glorious responsibility. One which I'm not sure we've quite grasped the importance of when we can so often choose to hold grudges or long for someone to receive their comeuppance.

No, this is Jesus ordaining us with his power, his breath, his spirit, ordaining us with his authority to forgive people's sins.

[10 : 01] Something which only God, so we're told, can do. And so it would seem that there's something of the incarnation of God in Jesus.

You know, this embodiment of God made flesh, which somehow continues in us. Now, holding that thought, let's turn to a picture of our relationship with God and with each other that the Apostle Paul paints in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Indeed, in this letter, Paul has been talking about the variety of ways in which everyone contributes to and plays their part in the life of the community.

A proper Heinz Variety's understanding of life where everyone brings their personality, their gifts, their talents, their experience, and adds it to the casserole of communal life.

However, rather than using a cooking metaphor of ingredients and so on, Paul likens this common life as being like a body, where every part is connected and essential to the good of the whole.

[11 : 13] In fact, let's read a bit of what he says. The body is not made up of one part, but of many. Suppose a foot says, I'm not a hand and so I'm not part of the body.

Wouldn't the foot still belong to the body? Or suppose an ear says, I'm not an eye and so I'm not part of the body. Wouldn't the ear still belong to the body? If our bodies were only an eye, we couldn't hear a thing.

And if they were only an ear, we couldn't smell a thing. But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

It takes many parts to make a single body. That's why the eyes cannot say they don't need the hands. That's also why the head cannot say it doesn't need the feet.

In fact, we cannot get along without the parts of the body that seem to be the weakest. God put our bodies together in such a way that even the parts that seem the least important are valuable.

[12 : 19] He did this to make all parts of the body work together smoothly with each part caring about the others. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.

If one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. It's a cracking, vivid picture painted by Paul, one which underlines the important part which everybody plays in helping a community to thrive.

I mean, we may not always be chuffed to be likened to a toenail or a taste bud, but we'd soon notice if those who offer us protection or cook up and serve flavoursome food weren't around.

No, we need all sorts of people in all sorts of roles to make life work. Likewise, there are all sorts of unseen aspects of our life together which are vital to our wellbeing, but which we can so easily take for granted.

So, this week, for example, me and my wife Gemma, our two kids, we were all excited to be able to be out and about again, and as a family, we went to a local adventure farm where our son Bobby was happily bouncing around on a big inflatable pillow with his sister.

[13 : 35] Unfortunately, though, as he was bouncing, his knee hyper-extended and bent back slightly the wrong way, you know, which kind of knackered his walking for the time being, poor guy.

Now, hopefully with a bit of TLC, his body will bounce back, but it was an indication of how vital the unseen ligaments are in holding our bodies together. And that, says Paul, is just like the unseen heroes, the quietly effective caregivers or supporters in our community who hold people's wellbeing together by serving their needs, often without anyone else noticing.

And so, just as our bodies are designed so that all parts work together smoothly, you know, some seen, some unseen, so too God, who sees it all, has designed our communal life to work with these same principles in mind.

Now, as I say, it's a nice picture of communal life. And yet, what's interesting, is that Paul doesn't just use this body picture as a general metaphor for community life.

Nah. Rather, it's an idea which is made far more profound than that, because Paul calls this body of people the body of Christ. Indeed, he goes on to put it like this, Now, you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

[15 : 13] And so far from simply being a metaphor, seems to me Paul is alluding to this idea that we are incarnational ourselves, in that through God's spirit being present in us, so our collective body becomes an embodiment of Jesus.

We become the body of Christ. Our feet are his feet. Our hands are his hands. Our mouth is his mouth. Our authority is his authority.

Indeed, to flesh this idea out a bit, here's how a Catholic theologian called Ronald Rollheiser picks up on this theme, when he describes what it means for us to love and forgive other people.

He puts it like this, You can continue to love and forgive them, and insofar as they receive that love and forgiveness, they are receiving love and forgiveness from God.

Your touch is God's touch. Since you are part of the body of Christ, when you touch them, Christ is touching them.

[16 : 26] When you love them, Christ is loving them. When you forgive them, Christ is forgiving them. Part of the wonder of the incarnation is the astonishing fact that we can do for each other what Jesus did for us.

Jesus gives us that power. As he says, it's an astonishing truth. But it's a truth, I think, which stands up to scrutiny.

You see, it helps to explain that when we meet certain people who just exude grace or presence or peace, we're instinctively drawn towards them. Why?

Because we are the body of Christ. That when we pray for one another and lay a hand on someone's shoulder, very often there's a kind of spiritual electricity that flows between us.

Why? Because we are the body of Christ. That when we witness someone else's bravery or suffering, it can resonate with us so deeply that we can almost feel their pain.

[17 : 35] Why? Because we are the body of Christ. You know, I wonder, even something as simple, yet at times as unnerving as making direct eye contact with someone and holding their gaze, why might that speak to us?

Well, I'd say it's because we're looking into their soul and maybe seeing something of the body of Christ within them. Now, we can work through some of the many implications of this idea in due course and there's today's extra time video with some questions to help us do just that.

But there's one particular outworking of this it'd be good just to dwell on for a bit. And that is the difference that the resurrection of Jesus makes to our understanding of the body of Christ.

You see, when Paul says we are the body of Christ, it's an image which has the resurrected Jesus in mind. Indeed, that's the best way to fully picture Jesus, the one who has gone to the cross but risen again.

And so when we talk of us being the body of Christ, it's the resurrected Christ who we're most fully representing. Now, two implications of this.

[18 : 58] Firstly, I'd say that means that in all of our interactions with other people and indeed the world around us, resurrection, this idea of new life, a fresh start, of the hope of redemption and so on, it's crucial that that shapes all that we're about.

And so this idea of renewal, of making all things new, that's how we're to embody Jesus to the world. So in terms of the environment and ecology, as the resurrected body of Christ, we're in the business of renewing creation and restoring the natural order of interwoven ecosystems and so on, living in harmony with and not exploitation of our environment.

In terms of our friendships, as the resurrected body of Christ, we're in the business of seeking to repair and restore relationships wherever possible.

Just as the resurrected Jesus did with Peter. So we, as Jesus' people, are called to rebuild that which is broken wherever we can. In terms of politics and wider society, as the resurrected body of Christ, we're in the business of overcoming the powers who would seek to control and gag those who speak truth, so that corrupt lobbying can be exposed and investment instead given to those who need it most.

In terms of church, as the resurrected body of Christ, we're in the business of not artificially keeping dying churches going, but instead seeing where new growth and new communities can be planted and developed.

[20 : 44] And so on and so on. Resurrection and imagination for what's possible go hand in hand. But the second implication of the fact that we, as the body of Christ, are representing the risen Jesus, is that we need not hide the scars of life which we carry with us.

Indeed, one of the key truths which the risen Jesus makes a point of sharing is that he carries with him the scars of his crucifixion. As he says to Thomas in front of all the other disciples, put your finger here, see my hands, reach out your hand and put it into my side.

Now, Jesus doesn't hide his scars. Rather, they're a reminder both of the suffering that has gone before, but also the hope which comes with the fact that those wounds are now healed.

And so if we are to fully be the resurrected body of Christ, I'd suggest we do well not to be ashamed of, to hide or explain away our scars, our emotional baggage, our previous mistakes, our damaged past.

Rather, just as Jesus did, I'd suggest we're to claim those scars, physical or otherwise, as part of the story of our lives through which God has been working and bringing his hope and healing too.

[22 : 22] Now, I don't know what scars, either inside or out, you'd say you'd carry. Those wounds which, although now healed, have had a lasting impact on you.

Indeed, I'll tell you about my biggest scar, which is on the outside of my body, but which has had lasting internal consequences too. And so, back when I'd just turned 21, I was diagnosed with a tumour on one of my salivary glands, a lump on the side of my face, just in front of my ear, which, by the time I had surgery to remove it, was about the size of a walnut.

Now, having a tumour there was tricky because it was surrounded by a whole network of nerves which enabled my face to move. And yet, when they cut me open to remove the tumour, there was inevitably some nerve damage to my face.

That meant for a while, I was paralysed on the left side of my face, couldn't close my eye, had to tape it down, couldn't really smile. Speaking clearly was tricky and I generally looked a bit sunken.

Now, thankfully, the tumour turned out to be benign and my face gradually got most of its feeling and mobility back. And yet, even to this day, I still can't really move my cheek or my top lip on the left.

[23 : 49] My left eye gets sore and so on. It's not a huge deal. You know, people live with far worse. But I've got a fading five-inch scar on my jawline as a memento.

However, the bigger impact of this operation has been on me as a person. Because as a 20, 21-year-old, you know, I think it's fair to say I was a bit of a cocky so-and-so, really.

You know, I'd be quick to take the mick out of others. I'd judge people on their appearance and so on. I wasn't like a nasty piece of work, but I could be pretty unpleasant still at times.

And yet, I can distinctly remember walking around for a while with this sunken face, feeling so self-conscious when I had to speak to anyone because I looked like Popeye or some Picasso painting, you know, speaking out the side of my mouth.

And so, having people judge or look at me funny simply because of my appearance well, it had a profound effect on me because my whole sense of what mattered changed almost overnight.

[25 : 00] Sounds a bit cliché, but I realised the stupidity, really, of judging on outward appearance and instead learnt that it's what's inside that counts.

Now, would I have wanted or chosen to have that tumour and that paralysis? No, of course not. But am I grateful for the way God has brought good out of it?

Yeah, absolutely. Now, as anyone who knows me can testify, I can still be a div and be judgmental and so on.

But I'm glad I've got this scar and the face tingles which come with it because it reminds me of the need to keep hold of the lessons I've been taught.

You see, my scar and its story, it's part of my new life as someone who God is slowly but surely transforming into the person I was always made to be.

[26 : 00] Someone who is able to take their place in the body of Christ, alongside you, alongside everybody else, and simply offer myself as one through whom Jesus, in his grace, can work.

And what's true for me is true for you. Whatever scars you might be bearing inside or out, whatever experiences you might be carrying from recently or long ago, none of it counts against us being members of the body of Christ.

Indeed, our scars are a sign of God's grace, since they're all things which can be taken and transformed by God, the one who knits each of us together through the Holy Spirit and as the resurrected body of Christ.

You are the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ in all of its scarred but sanctified self.

And you know what? The privilege, the responsibility, the authority, the opportunity we have as a people who Jesus is unafraid to put his name and give his power and presence to.

[27 : 27] Wow, how astonishing! How incredible is that? You are in me and I am in you, says Jesus.

