

Being the Body of Christ – a series of three sermons

ST LAURENCE CHURCH, ALVECHURCH

Being the Body of Christ - 1

Family Service & Parish Eucharist 22.1.17 delivered by Richard Bubbers

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Matthew 4:12-23

Jesus often taught in parables. I'd like to read to you a modern-day parable. It was written by an American Episcopalian minister in 1953 (Dr Theodore Wedel) and it's called the parable of the life-saving station:

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and, with no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching for the lost.

Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding areas wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews were trained. The little life-saving station grew.

Some of the new members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and so poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea and so they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in an enlarged building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, they re-decorated it beautifully and furnished it as a sort of club.

Less of the members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions and so they hired life boat crews to do this work. The mission of life-saving was still given lip-service but most were too busy or lacked the necessary commitment to take part in the life-saving activities personally.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin, some spoke a strange language and the beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal life pattern of the club. Some members insisted that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station, but they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the life of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. They evolved into a club and yet another life-saving station was founded.

If you visit the seacoast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, only now most of the people drown.

A life-saving station

This short sermon series over the next two weeks entitled "Being the Body of Christ" could be said to be about how we, as the body of Christ, can be a life-saving station in this place. In this week of prayer for Christian Unity it is perhaps salutary to reflect on the parable which we have just heard: it appears to be a weakness of human institutions that they can become overtaken by their own self maintenance, and side-line the purpose which brought them into being and makes them what they are. There can be a tendency of religious communities to move towards a "club" mentality. It was William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II, who said that the church is the only club whose existence is for the benefit of non-members. The question for us is, how can **we** be a life-saving station in **this, our** parish?

You will have noticed in our reading from Matthew's gospel that Jesus calls the first disciples like this, "come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of **people**." Jesus is inviting his disciples to join him in rescuing men and women, of whatever age, and giving them life. Jesus is a life saver. We see this from what he then immediately goes on to do at the start of his ministry: he preached the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. Jesus intended his church to be a "life-saving station." I want now to look at how **we** can be a life-saving station, as the local church, here in our parish.

Paul's picture of the body of Christ: every part is needed and important

I would like you please to turn with me to our reading we heard from [1 Corinthians 12.12-27](#)

The text I would like us to remember is verse 27: "*now **you** are the body of Christ, and **each one** of you is a part of it.*"

It has been said that one of the great gifts which St Paul gave us in the New Testament was his metaphor of the body of Christ – in other words his using the simple picture of a human body, which we can all understand, to explain how the different parts of the church work together as one. Unity with diversity. In an inspired idea he succinctly gives us a model of how all the different members of the church can work together as one – as one body – and be the physical body of Jesus Christ on the earth, until he comes again. "*Now **you** are the body of Christ, and **each one** of you is a part of it.*" Whatever your role in the church - and this morning we are particularly thinking of our local church - you are a member of Christ's body and have a part to play. As a son or daughter of God you are a member of the family: you are needed – without you the body cannot function properly.

Some of you will know that in the summer I broke the tendon at the end of the middle finger of my right hand. The result was that I was unable to bend the tip of that finger. I have just been discharged by the QE, but it has taken some six months to get me back to being able to use my finger normally. The reason I mention this is because, although it was a very small part of my anatomy - you might even think not a very important part – you would not believe how much disruption it caused, and the effort needed to get it working again. **Every** part of the body, with all its diversity, is needed: each has its part to play. "*Now **you** are the body of Christ, and **each one** of you is a part of it.*"

Paul's understanding of the body of Christ can be seen to come from that single famous, conversion experience, on the road to Damascus, which changed Paul's life forever. He learned of course that God comes to us to meet us where we are to offer us salvation: God's love is a totally free and unexpected gift – salvation is never earned or deserved but always comes out of God's grace and unconditional love. Paul also learnt that there is such a deep unity between Christians and their saviour that to

persecute the one is to persecute the other. Paul previously thought that Jesus was dead, and there was no connection between Jesus and his scattered followers. But on the Damascus road he learned that Jesus is alive, and living in the body of believers where his Spirit dwells. Paul came to see more and more clearly, that the Church is the body of Christ, which is made one by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Because of this Paul, as the first great missionary of Christianity, who took the good news of the gospel throughout most of the Roman Empire, preached the gospel and baptised believers, but also wherever he preached and baptised, he formed and nurtured a **body** of believers to support and serve one another. Paul referred to any community that he founded as a "body of Christ." It was not just a collection of individuals who believed in Jesus but it was a unified social body whose members worked together and helped one another in many ways. It was a body whose head was not Paul but Christ, for Christ remained the head even after Paul left to establish another community. It was a body whose spirit was not Paul's but Christ's, for each of the members received the Holy Spirit. Because it was a community with a single head and a single spirit Paul called it a body. Because its head and spirit were Christ's Paul could call it a body of Christ.

Almost all of the New Testament authors had some particular community in mind when they wrote their gospels and letters. Ultimately each of these communities was united, through their unity in Christ, with the universal church. But first they had to be the church that they were, where they were, with the people in their own local community. The wider universal Church has to be built on real, local communities – the local body of Christ. In the same way we have to be a body of Christ in our own particular local community before we can claim authentic membership in the larger body. In real life, most of Christianity is lived on the local level, in the nitty-gritty of personal relationships. That's precisely where we have to meet and love the Lord, if we are to claim to be his body. That's precisely where we learn to pray, to lay down our lives, and to forgive 70x7 times. It all happens in the local body of Christ. "**Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.**"

So that is something on why the body of Christ is so important, if we are to grow as Christians, and be a witness to the world around us. But what does this vision of the body of Christ mean in practice?

Signs of the body of Christ

So what can it mean to be the body of Christ, in the way which Paul means it? There are many ways by which we could seek to define it, but perhaps it's better if instead we identify three important signs, of what it is to be the body of Christ:

1. Jesus as our Lord

First, we are a body of Christ when Jesus is our Lord, not individually but together. When Jesus is our head and we are his members we recognise that the new life that we found together comes from him and flows from him. As we have seen, Paul describes this eloquently in our reading from **1 Corinthians 12**. You can easily understand what he's talking about if you imagine a hand that's been severed from a body. For a while it will still look like a hand, but unconnected to the head, it cannot move, it cannot live, it cannot be the member that it is supposed to be. Likewise, when individuals try to be Christians without having a personal relationship to Jesus, they may look like Christians but they really do not have the life which flows from being connected to him and obeying his direction. Either Jesus is our Lord or he is not. If he is not, we are letting other things direct and motivate us. If he is, then we will let him call the shots. If he is, then we let him lead us to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the church and for the sake of the world.

2 .Jesus as our life

Second, we are a body of Christ when Jesus is our life, again not singly but in community. It does not have to be life in a religious order. It does not have to be a life of total dedication to some worthy cause or work. It can and should be a life that is found in families, in church and school groups, on the job or just with friends. It only has to be a life of love. It has to be the love of Christ, loving through us. It has to be what the New Testament calls **agape love**: self-giving, unrestricted and inclusive love. Jesus' life and love was and is all embracing, without restriction and without divisions. Ordinary human love tends to be exclusive, but agape love is that inclusive gift from God which is the very love that Jesus loved others with, and that God loves us with.

Agape is also the love that we love God with. The love with which we love one another in community and the love with which we love God in our personal relationship with the Lord, is exactly this same love. This agape love is the life of God, the love which flows between the Father and the Son and pours out as the Holy Spirit into our lives and into the world. When that love flows between brothers and sisters in community we experience the life of God. It shows itself in a lack of concern for security, rightness, power, money, image, control – those things which we often identify with our ego and what Paul called our old self. He called us to put off our old self and put on our new self ([Ephesians 4.22 – 24](#) and [Colossians 3.9 – 10](#)) – letting go of our old self's concerns and taking on God's concerns: as Jesus put it, losing your life to find your life. This is the life with which Jesus lived, which he poured out in love, which was and still today is received as the Spirit of new life. This is what keeps us "alive" as Christians, and helps us to grow and move forward, and become the people God always intended us to be.

3. Jesus as our love

In [John 13.34](#) Jesus said, "*a new command I give you: love one another.*" He then gives the reason for this: "*as I have loved you, so you must love one another.*" Then he gives them the consequence of them obeying this command: "*by this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*" It's quite clear: we are to love one another, as he has loved us, so that others will know that we are his disciples – and want to become his disciples as well.

Seeing a different sort of community is so often the reason why people come to faith. God's people can be the most eloquent sermons – or not. If you look at how the church grew from the earliest beginnings at Pentecost all round the known Roman world, it was at least partly because the Christian communities were perceived to be significantly different from those around them. "*By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*"

So we have looked at something of what it can mean for us to be the body of Christ here in Alvechurch. Over the next two weeks, we will be looking at three particular ways which can help us to grow as Christ's community – as Christ's body – here in our parish. I hope you can be here, as we look further into being the body of Christ, in this place, at this time.

I close with some words from Teresa of Avila, which she wrote some 500 years ago:

"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."

Amen.

RDB 22.1.17

Being the Body of Christ - 2

Family Service & Parish Eucharist 29.1.17 delivered by Richard Bubbers

I Kings 19.1-13a, and Matthew 6.5-13 & 7.7-11

We're in the middle of a 3 week series on 'Being the Body of Christ'. Last week we looked at the modern-day parable of the life-saving station. We looked at how "Being the Body of Christ" could be said to be about how we, as the body of Christ here, can be a life-saving station in this place. We then looked at Paul's picture of the body of Christ: every part is needed and important. In **1 Corinthians 12** we focused on **verse 27**: "*now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*"

Paul used the simple picture of a human body to explain how the different parts of the church work together as one - unity with diversity - and be the physical body of Jesus Christ on the earth, until he comes again. Each Christian community which Paul founded was not just a collection of individuals who believed in Jesus, but it was a unified social body whose members worked together and helped one another in many ways. As the body of Christ in the local situation this is how we are able to grow as Christians and be a witness to the world around us. "*By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,*" was the new commandment given by Jesus to the disciples - and to us.

The battle-plan

We're now and next week going to be looking at three particular ways which can help us to grow as Christ's church – as Christ's body – here in our parish. To help focus our thoughts, I want to describe it as a "battle-plan." To put it succinctly, our battle-plan to help us grow as the body of Christ in this place could be described like this: (1) more prayer, (2) more time and skills, (3) more regular and proportionate giving. This week we are now going to look at prayer and next week we're going to look at time and skills, and regular and proportionate giving - we can see how this can help us in the mission and ministry God has given us here.

Prayer

1. Why pray?

So we come to the first part of our battle-plan – more prayer. The fundamental question we need to ask is this: why pray?

I would reply in the following way. **Do you want to live your Christian life relying on yourself and your own resources, or do you want to rely on God himself and trust him for what happens in your life?**

If you are to take prayer seriously this is the challenge which you have to take on board. This is all about being **connected** to God. It is not about being right – having the right theology of prayer or having the right techniques of prayer. It is all about being connected to God. Our life and God's life – our world and God's world – are actually not far apart. Our sphere of reality and God's sphere of reality – earth and heaven in biblical language – were made to fit together, and prayer is one of the key places where that happens. For this connection to God, we need an inner, spiritual life.

We all have an inner life. For some of us it is very developed, others do not give it much time or attention, and it is very little developed. But our inner life is important because it is our inner life that gives us lasting meaning. If we merely live in relationship to the external we will always, restlessly, be chasing after whatever, out there, can give us meaning. It was often asked why some survived in a death camp like Auschwitz and others didn't. Some of the survivors said that when one of their

colleagues ceased to see any meaning in existence and gave up all hope then their end was near. Our inner life, our souls, need meaning if we are not only survive but to flourish.

Ultimately our meaning comes from knowing that we are loved by God for who we are, as we are – unconditionally, without having to earn or deserve it. Prayer is vital in experiencing that we are indeed loved by God because prayer is the way God has given us to remain connected to his love, to rest in his love. In **John chapter 15** Jesus speaks of himself as the vine with us as branches remaining in the vine. Prayer is the way God has given us to sustain our life in him, whatever may be happening around us, so that we can grow into our full potential, and become the people God always intended us to be. This is the reason why our subject this morning is so vital and can help bring real and lasting transformation to our lives. Do you want to live your life relying on your own resources, or relying on and trusting in the One who made you, who wants the best for you, and who loves you more than you can ever imagine?

I also want to suggest that research is showing that a balance between our inner and outer life, a balance between action and prayer, is needed if we are to live whole, balanced and fulfilling lives, especially in what has been described in a recent book as the Age of Acceleration. Things are getting faster. You don't need me to remind you of the effect in the last ten years of, for example, smart phones, Facebook and Twitter to name but three. It is all the more difficult to be present, to give our attention, and not be distracted. Research is showing the addictive nature of what is available to us today - getting that e-mail, receiving a "like" on Facebook, can cause that feel good factor given by the release of dopamine in our brain and its addictive effect has been likened to what a gambler feels when he has a win. The advice is that we need, all the more, regular practices which can calm and settle us and help us to give our attention to what is important if we are to avoid the harmful effects of endless adrenaline rushes and the stress which can result. Our minds and bodies are not designed as machines to perform 24/7 - we need practices which can help to calm us and help our inner lives to have meaning and flourish and help us stay connected to God's love and wholeness.

2. What prayer isn't

There are two things which we can think prayer is limited to.

- We can think it is limited to telling God things. It is indeed good to tell God things but it is to help us, as we shall see in a minute, and not to help God. Whatever it is, God knows about it already.
- Also it's not just about asking for things. I know someone who was at home one evening with his seven-year-old son when the little boy said suddenly, "I'm going to bed now and I'm going to pray – any of you want anything?" God is not just an extension of our consumer mentality.

It is important to speak to God about the needs of others and ourselves. Indeed we have our intercessions – intercessory prayer – in our services. There is not time to talk about that more now, but I do have some notes on intercessory prayer, and on the Lord's Prayer which itself gives a very helpful framework for our prayers, if anyone would like a copy, please let me know. Intercessions are good, but prayer is about much more than just asking for things.

Also prayer is not just about using the right words or using the right techniques. Some people sadly are put off praying because they think God will not hear them unless they use the right words. Indeed in our passage from **Matthew 6.7** Jesus said: "*and when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*" Remember Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: it wasn't the long prayer of the Pharisee that was heard but the cry of the tax collector, "*Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.*"

3. What prayer is

So what then is prayer? Prayer is a way of seeing - prayer is a way of seeing reality. Prayer is about helping us to see the world from God's **big** perspective and not just our **small** perspective. Prayer is about getting us in tune with God's concerns and not just our own limited concerns. It can keep us connected to God's loving purposes and remind us of our dependence on **him** - of the illusion of our being in control, and of the importance of trusting him on a daily basis.

If you want a Bible verse to help you with this Paul says in **1 Thessalonians 5.17** "pray continually." If we are to pray "continually" prayer isn't only or even primarily words. It is an attitude, an outlook, a way of seeing the world. We're told the Jesus after his baptism was sent out into the wilderness by the Spirit for forty days – we cannot imagine that Jesus was offering verbal prayers for all of those 40 days.

As we heard in Advent God wants us to be awake, to be alert, and be attentive, so that we can hear him when he is saying something to us. Prayer is a way of helping us keep awake spiritually – otherwise it is possible to sleepwalk through life and never reflect and never be truly aware of the significance of what is happening, and what God may be trying to say to us.

Also, I just want to say that if you love someone you want to spend time with them and to get to know them. God loves us and prayer helps us to spend time with him and to get to know him more. It was St Augustine who wrote, "We are made for God and our hearts are **restless** till they find their **rest** in him." If we ignore him and try to fill our lives with other things we will never ultimately be satisfied. Nothing else can fill this "God shaped hole" in our lives. Ultimately, in the long run, our lives otherwise lack meaning and fulfilment. Prayer helps us to grow in our knowledge and love of him, and as we pray we find that we also get to know ourselves better, and we learn to align ourselves more with God's will rather than with our own ego.

If prayer is not a regular part of your life and way of living, getting started is always the most important thing. Take one step at a time. Don't be overambitious – especially when beginning. Try just 5 min a day – and don't worry if you miss a day, just keep going when you can. Simply find a quiet place where, if possible, you will not be disturbed and talk to God as if you were talking to your best friend. Talk to him about those things closest to your heart, and then listen – listen. Prayer is happening the moment we turn to God and simply try to speak with him. There is no cleverness involved in this, we just have to trust that this is so, and if we trust we will find it to be so.

If anyone would like some practical suggestions to help with praying, please let me know.

4. Be still and know that I am God – **Psalm 46.10**

Be still – Elijah was anywhere but a place of calm and stillness.

Our Old Testament reading showed us that Elijah was at the end of his tether after defeating the prophets of Baal and trying to escape from Ahab and Jezebel. His life is in grave danger. He was in a very bad place – he had enough and just wanted to give up. God realises this and helps him to rest. God then comes to him – and the point of the story, as we heard, was that God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but that he was in the still small voice. There is a wonderful translation which tries to get the meaning of the original Hebrew like this: "God was in the sound of sheer silence." This was the place where Elijah had to be to receive from God and to hear what he had to say. God was not in the noise and busyness, he was to be found by Elijah in the "sound of sheer silence." There may be fires, earthquakes and wind in our lives, but if they take all our attention they can actually be a

distraction from finding the wisdom we need to save our lives – and others. What space are you allowing so that you can find the wisdom which God wants you to have for your life?

Stillness – being still, being present, being awake, resting in his love, (whatever wonderful way you wish to describe it) – this is an important part of being in prayer. If we just rush into his presence and speak out our words and rush off again, we will be missing out on so much, and we will be missing out on the opportunity for our relationship with him to grow and develop as it could. In the day workshop on Christian Contemplation on 11 March we will be looking at this in greater depth, and looking at some practices which can help us in our prayer life and daily living. It can be wonderfully enriching when prayer like this is linked to Scripture – and Richard Johnston in the workshop on Christian Contemplation on 11 March will be giving us opportunity, amongst other things, to try out doing this with different passages of Scripture.

All of us come with our own individual temperament and experience. The contemplation we are talking about is not just for people who like that sort of thing – not just for people who live in monasteries – it is something that can help each one of us in the busyness of our daily routines. It can help us to focus on being still, to be present, and to be able to choose to give our attention to something important without being distracted. I want to suggest that there is a place for both contemplation and action – our inner life and our outer life. How we balance the two may be different depending on our temperament, stage of life and experience, but there is still the place for both – if we are to be still, and know that he is God.

This is about how things can move from our head to our heart. It is about how we can know not just in our conscious mind, but in our experience. This is how our experience of God, and not just our head knowledge of God, can grow and flourish – and can bring about transformation in our character and living, bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

5. Some practical things to think about

On other occasions there will be opportunity to look at practical ways of helping us to pray, both individually and together.

I have mentioned some notes on prayer which I am happy to provide if requested. I have also referred to the flyer at the back of church which gives details of the Christian Contemplation Day Workshop in the Ark on Saturday 11 March, and details of how to reserve your place.

We are, from February on fourth Sunday of each month (before Sacred Space), going to have the church open for 40 minutes from 5.00pm, for those who would like to come and "be still". There will be some suggestions for guiding your prayer on particular issues but it will be your time to use as you wish to.

There are also various daily aids such as Bible reading notes or daily meditations/blogs, which can help to encourage the routine for a short time each day of reading a short passage of Scripture alongside your own private prayer.

Be still and know that I am God.

Amen

RDB 29.1.17

Being the Body of Christ - 3

Family Service & Parish Eucharist 5.2.17 delivered by Richard Bubbers

Luke 12.13-34 and 2 Corinthians 8.1-15

Previously we looked at Paul's picture of the body of Christ - every part is needed and important. The text in **1 Corinthians 12** we focused on was **verse 27**: "now **you** are the body of Christ, and **each one** of you is a part of it." Paul used the simple picture of a human body to explain how the different parts of the church work together as one - unity with diversity - and be the physical body of Jesus Christ on the earth, until he comes again.

As the body of Christ in the local situation this is how we are able to grow as Christians and be a witness to the world around us. "By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another," was the new commandment given by Jesus to the disciples - and to us.

The battle-plan: (1) prayer

We said we would look at three particular ways which can help us to grow as Christ's church – as Christ's body – here in our parish. To help focus our thoughts it was described as a "battle-plan."

Put simply, our battle-plan to help us grow as the body of Christ in this place could be described like this: (1) more prayer (2) more time and skills (3) more regular and proportionate giving.

Last week we looked at prayer which is the foundation of all that we are and do as the body of Christ. The heart of it is our relationship with God and how we maintain our inner, spiritual life. We saw that prayer is not just about words: it is primarily a way of seeing - a way of seeing reality. Prayer is about helping us to see the world from God's **big** perspective and not just our **small** perspective. Prayer is about getting us in tune with God's concerns and not just our own limited concerns. It can keep us connected to God's loving purposes, and remind us of our dependence on him - of the illusion of our being in control, and of the importance of trusting **him** on a daily basis. Prayer is a way of helping us keep awake, spiritually – otherwise it is possible to sleepwalk through life, and never reflect and never be truly aware of the significance of what is happening, and what God may be trying to say to us.

Battle-plan: (2) time and skills

We are now going to look at how to use our time and skills as part of being the body of Christ.

Our gospel reading this morning in **Luke 12.13** reminded us of the folly of the rich fool. *He said to himself, "this is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"* Jesus said (**verse 21**): "this is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God."

It's been said that the church has no personnel or financial problems, they are only spiritual problems, as what we do with our time, energy and our possessions, flows out of our response to the love that God has shown us.

I would remind you of the choice we looked at last week - do we want to live out our Christian life relying on ourselves and our own individual resources, or do we choose to rely on God himself and trust him for what happens in our life?

When it came to this choice/ this challenge, the rich fool failed spectacularly. It was all about him, and about how he would control from his own resources, his happiness and his security. In the event he lost his life – and where was he then?!

We may also ask, even if he had lived longer, would he have been truly happy in a lasting and fulfilling way? Bernie Ecclestone, the multi billionaire, when once asked whether he had enough said this “you can never, have, enough”. St Augustine more famously said, "We are made for God and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him." In the last verse of our gospel passage Jesus said “*where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*”

How is it that we can be rich towards God? To use a modern analogy, do you have money or credit in the right bank when it comes to drawing down for the really big things of life – love, forgiveness, suffering, death, lasting meaning, deep contentment? How we use our time and our skills, all of which God has given us, is all part of this. God wants us to live healthy and whole lives. He wants us to have a work-life balance – it was God of course who created the principle of Sabbath rest. He wants us to be the best we can be as husbands/wives/partners/parents/children, in whatever close relationships we have.

But if we stop there we will lose something in the way in which we live, in the way in which we treat those around us, whether our loved ones or not. Jesus’ heart, his compassion, his love, which he himself shows us, is an inclusive love. It is not exclusive or tribal, it's described as agape love in Paul's wonderful passage in **1Corinthians 13** on what love truly is. Therefore part of how we spend our time and use our skills is, in God's loving purposes, for the benefit of others from whom we may not necessarily get something in return.

If you are a member of the body of Christ this includes your involvement with the body of Christ. In the New Testament, as Paul went around the Roman world founding new Christian communities, he formed and nurtured a body of believers to support and serve one another. Paul referred to any community that he founded as a "body of Christ." It was not just a collection of individuals who believed in Jesus, but it was a unified social body whose members worked together and helped one another in many ways.

We now live in a society in the 21st-century where things are more complex. We have health and safety, safeguarding and other such requirements which, quite properly, we need to attend to. We have a listed building as our church building – a wonderful inheritance, a place of worship which means so much to so many. We have a church centre, the Ark, which is used by many in our church community and by many in our village community. I have never been in a church where the church centre is so used by the local community. This is all part of our being the body of Christ in this place. Our motivation is to maintain and grow the mission and ministry of God in this place. We have inherited what previous generations of the body of Christ have given us: we want to pass this on to future generations of the body of Christ. For us to do this - for us, in this generation, to play our part - we are called together to use our time and our skills in a way that helps to build up the body of Christ here and now. I am keenly aware of those who give of their time and skills to keep our fellowship moving forward on Sundays and through the week. They give of their time and effort often in unseen ways. To them, we as the body of Christ here, we want to say thank you.

I am also aware that the more we can appropriately share what is involved in the pastoral and practical work of this church, the more we will be able to carry out our mission and ministry as the body of Christ in this parish.

We are all aware of demographic changes in society, for example, retirement ages are being put back and there are the growing pressures for those in work, making a work-life balance all the more difficult. God knows and understands each of our situations whatever they may be, and some stages of life are of course more limiting than others.

If you consider yourself to be a member of the body of Christ here I would simply ask you, as your priest and pastor, especially if you have not done this before, to consider carefully before God the skills and abilities he has given you, whatever they may be, and to see whether he is asking how you could use them in some way in building up the body of Christ here. Remember the picture of the body – we all have our different skills and different part to play, the important thing is that we play our part. The body is then able to function in the way it is intended to and, together with God's help and by his spirit, we can build up the kingdom of God in this place, in this generation.

Battle-plan: (3) more regular and proportionate giving

We now come to the third part of our battle plan: more regular and proportionate giving.

As we all know from our own household budgeting, dealing with our finances is not only a necessary part of what we have to do but it can have a vital effect on what we are able to do and how we are able to do it. Martin Luther said, "there are three conversions necessary: conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse."

I think it is really significant that the parable of the rich fool is used by Jesus to give his teaching on not being anxious. In the middle of our gospel passage (**v. 27**) after the parable, Jesus says, "therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life..." Remember the choice we looked at - do you want to live your life relying on your own strength and your own limited resources, or do you want to live relying on God himself and trusting him for what happens in your life? Jesus is making it very clear - relying on your own resources (what you have, what you do) leaves you open to anxiety. Our own resources are inevitably limited. If you think I've got it wrong, please make a note of the chapter and read it when you get home. It is very difficult to seek the kind of peace and contentment which Jesus is talking about here if you continue to rely, when the chips are down, on yourself and your own limited resources.

I would like to dispel one myth that can still linger around sometimes about the Church of England and money. It's probably easiest to deal with it by quoting a notice which I saw in a church I once visited. It said this "people sometimes think that the church has vast resources and doesn't need financial support. That's not true. Every parish church, like ours, depends wholly on the financial giving of members, supporters and friends." Put simply brothers and sisters, as the body of Christ in this place, we are in need of more regular givers and more proportionate giving for us to have the income to maintain and grow God's mission and ministry here.

More proportionate giving

First, let us look at more proportionate giving - more giving as a proportion or percentage of our net income. In **2 Corinthians 8.12** and **1 Corinthians 16.2** Paul teaches the importance of giving as a proportion or percentage of our income. Many Christians have found the Old Testament principle of tithing, giving 10%, to be a very helpful guide to giving and something which they have moved towards and which God has honoured in their lives. It is important to realise that the New Testament does not actually lay down a precise proportion to give. The teaching is very much focused on the attitude of the giver, giving out of love in response to God's love to us, not reluctantly or under compulsion for, as it says in **2 Corinthians 9.7**, "God loves a cheerful giver." But in the light of what the New Testament says said about God's grace and generosity many Christians have found tithing to be a very useful starting point, when it comes to our giving back to God.

The Church of England recommends that our initial target should be to give 5% of our net income to the local church, and to give the rest of whatever we give to other good causes we wish to support. This is not something which should be legalistic or prevent our being generous as this would go against the whole spirit of how the New Testament talks about giving out of God's generosity to us. There may well of course be specific appeals for fund-raising for capital projects on which other stakeholders in

the village can also be involved. The important thing is not so much the precise proportion but that we see our giving in a proportionate way if we have not done this before. If we are concerned about the regular needs of our church here in its mission and ministry, the important thing is that we begin to see our giving as a proportion of our income. If we can begin to do this God is able to use it, indeed he will honour the attitude in this response and this will be seen in how the church's financial outgoings and obligations are met by the church's income in a way that only God is able to bring about.

If enough of us at St Laurence can respond to God, after prayerful reflection and consideration, in a proportionate way, I do sincerely believe that there will be enough for what God wants to do through us as the body of Christ this place in the mission and ministry of his kingdom here.

More regular givers

Paul encourages us to think through and **plan** our giving. He would not want this to prevent spontaneous generosity as he speaks of us being "cheerful" in our giving, but an advantage of planning our giving is that it allows us to allocate money upfront and prevents us from treating what we give as an afterthought. Also, for regular giving, if we do not make conscious decisions about how much to give we are likely to give less.

If you can set up a standing order this ensures our church of regular income if, for example, you are not able to be present on a Sunday for whatever reason. This also has the advantage that if you are a UK taxpayer and provide a simple gift aid declaration, the church treasurer can recover from your tax office the basic rate tax of 20% which you have already paid to the government, at no additional cost to you and with a considerable additional benefit to the church.

Our church treasurer, Janet Wright, is happy to answer in confidence any questions you may have. *Janet's telephone number is 0121 445 4335 (By way of paperwork, the key thing, if after prayerful reflection you wish to do this for the first time or to increase your standing order, is to fill out an A5 standing order form, and if you pay basic rate income tax an A5 gift aid form. You will find these forms at the back of church. Please return them to Janet Wright, our treasurer, once the forms have been completed. Any such forms can always be returned to our treasurer confidentially in an envelope marked for her attention through the offertory plate or through the church office.*

To claim the gift aid back, there is also now one more gift aid form at the back of church (A4 size), which you now need to complete and return as well, please. Janet will be very happy to answer any questions.)

Proportionate, and regular giving is what is needed for the "bread-and-butter" expenditure which is needed every week/every month to sustain our church and what it seeks to do. This church is no different to any other body or family or individual. In order to live and honour our commitments and obligations we need regular income on which we can rely for planning and budgeting. If we want the church to be here and to be part of this community - to be the body of Christ here, and to play its part in bringing forward God's kingdom, it is for each of us prayerfully to consider our response to the love and generosity which God has shown to us.

As we come to our communion this morning, my prayer is that this short series will be just the start of a process, whereby, individually and together, we get more into the habit of praying/spending time with our loving heavenly Father – and, in response to his love, consider how we spend our time and energy, and what it means to give regularly and proportionately, as part of the body of Christ here and now, for the building up of his kingdom and his honour and glory.

Ephesians 3.20 Now to him who is able to do in measurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever !

Amen

RDB 5.2.17