

Sermon at Receptive Ecumenism Conference, January 2009

There can be few starker or more startling narratives than the little vignette Mark gives us of the call of the disciples, as in our gospel reading today. Jesus has just come into Galilee preaching ‘the gospel of God’ and announcing the dawning of the Kingdom of God. Down by the sea of Galilee he sees two brothers casting their nets in the sea and abruptly, imperiously, he calls them to follow after him. Mark, with his trade-mark adverb ‘immediately’, describes them as doing just that – no ifs or buts, no delays, no questions, no negotiations, no periods of preparation: they immediately left their nets and followed him. As if to reinforce the effect, Mark repeats the scenario: Jesus sees two more brothers, in this case mending their nets; he calls them, and they leave their father in the boat, and go after him. They go ‘after him’, ‘behind him’, those are the terms that will recur later in this Gospel describing the journey of the disciples ‘behind’ or ‘after’ Jesus to Jerusalem, the journey on which, Jesus says, ‘if any one will come after me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me’ (8.34). ‘If any one’: Mark recounts these callings on the shore of Galilee as paradigms. Mark’s readers hear themselves addressed in this stark opening scene, addressed by a call that is direct, simple and uncompromising. And we could hardly ask for a more straightforward reminder of why we are here, as followers of Jesus. Not because we decided Christianity was a good idea; not because it offers good career prospects; not because other people approve; not because it is comforting and affirming; simply because Jesus has called, summoned and enlisted us, simply because he has issued his call. Whatever else we are – priests or

laypeople, academics or practitioners, we are first and foremost, first and last, disciples of Jesus, called to follow after him.

But what does this call entail? For these disciples in Mark's narrative it means leaving their familiar location, leaving their families, leaving their jobs, and fundamentally changing their social expectations. First-century hearers of this story would think immediately of a well-known urban figure, the Cynic wandering preacher, who also abandoned his home, his social roots, his family and his occupation, to travel from place to place preaching a philosophical path to happiness through self-sufficiency. The Cynic preacher was the epitome of the self-sufficient, heroic individual, who showed that one could do without money, home, fame or social advancement and still be supremely happy – indeed happier and freer without all those snares and ambitions. The Cynic ideal of the go-it-alone, self-sufficient hero lives on in our culture, of course, and can still be confused with the Christian calling: we admire the solo-traveller, the lone explorer, the celebrity survivor, the tough individualist, the self-sufficient hero.

But Jesus is not calling his disciples into Cynic individualism and self-sufficiency, he is calling them, in groups, into a new community, calling them from one family and one social environment into another. Because the Gospels are rightly focused on Jesus, we learn rather little there about the inner life of such communities, but this becomes much clearer in the epistles, where it is evident that 'going it alone' is not at all what characterises the Christian life. On the contrary, the chief characteristic of these communities is *mutual dependence*, and this is nowhere better elaborated than in Paul's vivid metaphor of the body, our second reading. The oneness of the body is, of course, a frequent ecumenical metaphor, just as it was a common political metaphor in antiquity,

but we should note the particular stress Paul lays in our passage on diversity and on the structural necessity of need, vulnerability and mutual dependence. He is discussing *charismata*, gifts of the Spirit variously distributed not by our own will or choice, but by a divine distribution which ensures that no one part of the community is self-sufficient or self-complete. The eye cannot say to the hand 'I have no need of you', or if it does, it will soon discover how limited it is in its self-important stress on sight. The head cannot say to the feet, 'I have no need of you', or if it does it will soon find that the view never changes. *Need* is the one thing we naturally proud individuals, and naturally proud institutions, find it hardest to acknowledge. Do the powerful need the weaker? Do the rich need the poor? Do the successful need the struggling? Do the somebodies need the nobodies? Yes, precisely so, says Paul, who takes delight in turning this image of the body away from its normal ancient alignment with the patriarchal hierarchies of society. The whole point of the body metaphor in ancient political applications is to reinforce the status quo of the powerful: it is used to tell the weak and the poor that the leisured and the rich are not parasites on the body politic, but integral and necessary parts of the body: we all play a role in the body, so just get on, you slum-dwelling workers, and make the surplus that we rich will live off. In this discourse, the hard-working hands are reminded that they need the belly and the weary feet that they need the head.

Paul plays this the other way around: the head needs the feet, the strong need the weak, the honourable need the dishonoured. Those limbs of the body, he says, that seem to be weaker are necessary/indispensable; and those parts of the body which we judge less honourable we invest with the greater honour – and God has arranged it so. Note the language of power and honour. Paul is acutely aware that gift-giving is always

implicated in power-relations, that benefactors exercise power in the giving of a gift, and that those who receive gifts but are never allowed to be givers themselves are thereby diminished, disempowered and dishonoured. In the body as he perceives it, Paul sees a structure carefully designed to complexify power-relations, to alter or counter normal hierarchies and to operate systems of gift-exchange where honour is given in all directions, and never only in one.

What is envisaged here is a community bound together in the exchange of gift, bound not only by the ability to give to others but also by a structural arrangement of lack or need. Each part of the body can expect *in some respects* to have something that others need and the ability to give it; no one is superfluous, peripheral or dispensable, as all have some *charisma* to share with others. At the same time, each part of the body can expect *in some respects* to be in deficit and in need, and to require the help and contribution of others to meet that need; no part is self-sufficient or complete. In this way, a community of gift-sharing is also a community of interdependence; it is built into the very structure of this community that each is dependent on others for its own flourishing and its own fulfilment.

This is harder than it seems; it is painful and humbling to recognise that we are *also* the ones in need and in lack. I think Paul recognised this in himself. As he introduces himself to the Romans he starts by saying that he longs to see them ‘that I may impart to you some *charisma*, to strengthen you’, and then hastily corrects himself – ‘that is, I mean, that we may be *mutually* encouraged by each others’ faith, both yours and mind’ (Rom 1.11-12). (I love that about Paul’s letters – you can see Christian thought in flow, including Christian self-correction in the middle of a sentence!) So even the

apostle is not self-sufficient; he needs his converts, his companions and his churches quite as much as they need him. He knows that this dynamic of reciprocity is also difficult between churches. He works very, very hard to get his churches to see that they owe something to their distant brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, and when he finally wrings some money out of the reluctant Corinthians, he wants them to recognise that although they think they have everything in abundance, there are things that in fact they lack, that the impoverished Jerusalem church could and will supply (2 Cor 8.7-15). Not even the super-spiritual and super-competent Corinthians are self-sufficient; they are bound to Jerusalem by the mutuality of gift-exchange, and thus by a mutuality of need.

This is Paul's vision of unity, not an undifferentiated uniformity, but neither a diversity that is unified by a static hierarchy of power. God's peculiar arrangement of the body, he says, is that there should be no *schisma* within it – by which he means not just no discord, but no disunity, no schism, no divide. What should prevent the body falling apart into mutual indifference, or mutual hostility, is that every part needs the others, and can only be healthy, fulfilled and fruitful by the contribution of others. As Colossians and Ephesians put it, this is how the body grows: the aim is not just survival, but development, enhancement, fulfilment and the reaching of our highest potential. And who is it that constitutes this body? 'By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit' (12.13). Every baptised believer is a gifted and needy member of this body, in which traditions, histories and ethnic differences are relativised by a common allegiance to Christ.

This is the body into which we are called and summoned by Jesus, and in which we were sealed in baptism. No ifs or buts, no coming in on our own terms, no

negotiation of special status, no concessions to our desire to preserve our dignity or our self-sufficiency. Christ calls us into a community abounding in gifts, designed to place us in surplus, with gifts to give to others, and in lack, needing gifts from others. If we don't like it, we'd better go back to mending our nets.