

## SAINT PAUL AND THE 'BODY OF CHRIST' METAPHOR

The Bishop of Chichester has designated 2017 as 'The Year of the Bible' in which he encourages church members to take a closer look at the biblical texts and the way in which they relate to the Church today. Indeed, this year's Lenten course is directed towards this task. To make a start there can be no more fascinating biblical interpretation and its relation to the Church than Saint Paul's metaphor the 'Body of Christ'.

In order to see the metaphor through the eyes of Paul we should be mindful that he was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin by birth, a Roman citizen and a convert to the Christian faith. Inevitably then he would have brought these influences to his theological interpretation.

The word church is derived from the Greek word *ecclesia* but may have picked up connotations of the Hebrew word *qahal*, or assembly, during translation. In this context, the word means the covenant assembly of Israel called out before God in relation to the Greco-Roman world. Two texts in the Gospel of Matthew attribute the word church as coming from Jesus. Moreover, the word is the single most frequent word used in the New Testament for those people who assembled in the name of Christ. However, it is also used by the author/s of the Acts of the Apostles in reference to a general assembly of people who rioted against Paul in Ephesus. Essentially though, Paul understands the Church as the people of God who are called out and who are living in the expectation of Christ's coming again.

In his first Letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers a detailed analogy from the experience of Israel in the wilderness based on the assumption of a new covenant in the blood of Christ that is a universal covenant for all humanity. In his later Letter to the Romans, Paul develops this definition into the imagery of God's people as the Body of Christ. A possible explanation for this shift could be that Paul was most likely searching for a more inclusive imagery for the Gentiles. What then were the grounds upon which Paul adopted the metaphor of the 'Body of Christ'? Well, the body politic was a familiar concept in the political philosophy in Paul's time as exemplified in the fable of Menenius Agrippa. Here, the unity of the State is dependent upon the recognition of the mutual inter-dependence of its diverse membership. A discernible shift in emphasis has thus occurred in Paul's theology from the people of God imagery of the historical state of Israel to a church community that is united in its allegiance to Christ in the sharing of his Body through Baptism and the Eucharist.

This is very much a relational theology because Paul understands saving union in Christ with communion into Christ, the baptised as having 'put on Christ' and of baptism 'into the death of Christ'. Paul also speaks of baptism 'into one body' so to be 'in Christ' is synonymous with being in the unity of the Body of Christ. Thus, incorporation into the Church means incorporation into Christ. However, Paul's point of reference for the metaphor is varied and developed. For example, he can speak of



**St Paul**  
by Bartolomeo Montagna

'...the bread which we break is...participation in the body of Christ', 'just as the body is one and has many members...so also in Christ', '...you are Christ's body and individually members', and '...we are all one body in Christ'.

If we pause now, and take a look at the process of development we find that a later theology, that of the Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, points us towards the conviction that Christ's sufferings, death and resurrection were not only historical but also cosmic events. In these Letters, Christ becomes the head of the body of the universal Church where both Jews and Gentiles are afforded equal status in a new creation where the Law is abrogated and Israel is regarded as a past entity. The main concern here is that the Church should grow into Christ, its head. So then, this developed theology cannot be derived from the Church as being Christ's body because Paul developed this image quite independently in his first Letter to the Corinthians. Rather, it is as head over the whole realm of spiritual power that Christ becomes God's gift to the Church. The emphasis in the Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians is thus on Christ as head of the cosmos and not of the Church as such. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is not the cosmos but the Church that is Christ's body. Thus, whereas Paul's church imagery and Christ's body imagery should be interpreted in strict anatomical terms, nevertheless, a clear distinction should be made between these two imageries. Paul's imagery of inter-dependence between the parts of an organism has shifted towards the necessity of inter-dependence for a corporate growth into Christ for a developing Church. Indeed, failure to make this distinction could result in the Church being wrongly interpreted as a headless entity.

So then, what are we to make of all this? Well, it is possible that Paul created a rationale towards a delayed 'second coming' in cosmological terms. The Messiah had come and had risen but there was no evidence for a general resurrection for believers.

However, there is the danger that the Body of Christ metaphor may be interpreted literally and the Church itself be seen as divine. Nevertheless, for Paul, the Church as a eucharistic community partakes of and is sustained through the unity of the whole Body of Christ. Indeed, by the time of the Patristic age Ignatius of Antioch (2nd century CE) writes that under the leadership of a bishop there is no distinction between the whole eucharistic people of God and the whole Church united in Christ's body. Again, although Clement of Alexandria (3rd Century CE) recognised both spacial and temporal characteristics of the Church as the apostolic tradition, nevertheless he reasoned that because Jesus prayed that God's will be accomplished on earth, then the earthly Church is a copy of the invisible heavenly Church. Clement conceptualised the invisible Church from the prophet Isaiah as a holy mountain upon which the people of God are assembled. For him, those of God's earthly Church who constitute the fleshly Body of Christ but who nevertheless strive to become one in spirit with God, also constitutes the mystical Body of Christ. Clement has thus presented an interpretation of the Church as both visible and invisible. Indeed, this interpretation remains central to the Christian liturgical affirmation of faith as exemplified in the Nicene Creed.

We should seek then to be faithful to our bishop's charge to adopt 2017 as 'The Year of the Bible' by approaching the biblical texts with enthusiasm for what they reveal to us about the Church today.

***Barbara Knight***