

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany, Year C

**Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10 • Psalm 19\* • 1 Corinthians 12.12-31a • Luke 4.14-21**

**St Luke's, Chelsea**

**23 January 2022**

**Sam Hole**

A drawing room, in a comfortable Victorian home, in a northern town. The year is 1912. Five people are gathered together. The moment is one of joy. For this is a family of four whose daughter has just got engaged. One family of local high-standing will be joined through marriage with another. Father, mother, son, daughter and her fiancé are gathered to celebrate. Suddenly there is a ring on the doorbell. In walks a police officer. A young woman in the town, Eva Smith, has committed suicide. He has some questions to ask.

So begins J.B. Priestley's famous play *An Inspector Calls*. And in what follows each of the characters turns out to be in some way implicated in the downfall of that young woman. Arthur, the father, dismissed Eva from one of his mills for her role in planning a strike. Sheila, his daughter, had Eva fired from a job in a local department store out of jealousy at her good looks. Gerald, Sheila's fiancé, realises that Eva was the woman he met in a seedy bar, who then became his mistress. Arthur's son Eric admits under questioning that he was the man who recently forced himself on Eva, leaving her pregnant. Sybil, wife of Arthur and mother of Sheila and Eric, turns out to be head of the local women's charity – and it was her arguments which caused the committee to refuse support to the pregnant and destitute Eva.

Inspector Goole's investigations are over. Each of these five apparently upstanding people has contributed to Eva's downfall. As he walks off stage, he offers a striking parting line:

'But [J]ust remember this. One Eva Smith has gone - but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. Good night.'

'We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.' The message of the play is straightforward. We need to care for one another. No

one person in that family killed Eva Smith. But Arthur, Sheila, Gerald, Eric, and Sybil – each made decisions that helped to ruin it. And so, in Priestley’s view, each must realise themselves to be partially responsible for her terrible end.

‘We are members of one body.’ The first audiences at Priestley’s play, watching in the immediate aftermath of World War Two, would doubtless have recognised the line’s scriptural allusion. It is, of course, to the words from Paul we heard in today’s New Testament reading. The many members of the body, says Paul, need one another. The eye and the hand, the head and the foot – each forms part of a whole that only works when each member plays its part. And no member is worthy of particular honour or disgrace: each has a particular role to play, and should be celebrated for that talent.

Paul’s analogy is, first and foremost, an analogy for the church. We Christians have been, Paul is saying, baptised into one body – the Body of Christ. Within Christ’s Body we are called to play different roles, drawing on the various gifts we have been given. So we may find ourselves serving publically, or unseen. We may be welcoming newcomers; teaching children in Sunday School; offering healing comfort to one another; leading worship in reading, intercessions and music; helping to administer all we do; caring for those in need outside our immediate community, and much else besides.

And yet Priestley’s first audiences would likely have extended the analogy with ease to the British society of their day. For theirs was the age of the welfare state. It was the era when the British public, in the wake of the ‘fire and blood and anguish’ of World War Two, entered into a pact with one another to have the state provide for the basic concerns of all, thereby ensuring the dignity of all. This was, of course, the intention. And in many ways, it performed admirably. I need not list the many great legacies of that period in seeking to address Beveridge’s five ‘evils’ of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness.

But it is also worth bearing in mind that the welfare state never succeeded in making the British population some kind of grand instantiation of Paul’s Body of Christ. While greatly reduced, the five evils remained. What’s more, the postwar settlement was based on a very national – not global – understanding of who were our fellow members. Just think of the racism and rejection experienced by postwar migrants to this country. And this vision of the state as the frame for the body proved to be a brief consensus. It lasted unquestioned little more than a generation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> You might say that our model shifted to hope that the strongest might pull the weak along in their wake.

'We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.' Does Priestley's line still ring true in our society today? Should it?

Absent of the shared belief in God that bound Priestley's generation together, it is hard to see what undergirds the metaphor. An appeal to a 'common humanity' has a weak pull when it is unclear quite what that means. And yet, for my view, I don't want to let go of the ideal too quickly. For we in Chelsea are indeed bound to those in Cumberland or Crewe by a common heritage, culture and geography. To channel Inspector Goole, what they 'think or say or do' impacts on us, and vice versa. And in today's world we face two dilemmas. First, how to live as that one body if the state is no longer to play so strong a role in joining us together. Second, how to live as members of this British body while recognising that we are at the same time members of many other bodies across the world: what is thought or said or done reverberates beyond our land. This is to offer a weaker, perhaps less assertive, sense in which we are still in this country members of one body.

And yet these dilemmas on our national stage may throw us back to Paul's original vivid description of this one Body. As we ponder them, we may be struck again by how distinctive, how hopeful, how dignifying, are his words. For we live in a time when it is all too tempting for governments to learn their politics from the deeds of the ancient Roman emperors: ensure that those who keep you in power are happy, and ignore the rest. That is the political context in which Paul and the Corinthians lived.

And to those diverse folk Paul wrote words that offered a vision of a better way, and may be a still more excellent way for us today. For, like the Corinthians, we are members of the Body of Christ, in this congregation and around the world. And it is in the works of God that we find our shared humanity. For we have been created by God in the image of God. We share in the redemption brought by Christ. And we open ourselves to the ways in which the Spirit seeks to draw each of us into the knowledge and love of God. Each one of us here today matters, has an individual dignity, is loved. And we are bound together as the Body of Christ. 'One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all', living life together to the praise and glory of God.