

## **The soul to the body**

A sermon preached by Revd Rob Gilbert on 19 April 2015 – the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter at St Peter's Wolvercote. Readings: Acts 3:12-19; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48.

I don't know about you, but one of the things I absolutely love about Paul's letters is their freshness and immediacy. He clearly does live in a different kind of world to ours, in many ways, but in another sense he is simply a contemporary of ours. We all live in the same age, the age of Christ.

So when I read Paul's letters I like to remember that these *are* letters, between one man and people he knew. One feature of them I particularly like is the places when he's being especially grumpy, or when some personal comment comes through as when he notes how inelegant his own handwriting is. On that count, maybe because, with my handwriting, it's a comment I personally resonate with.

Today I want to start by reading you a section from another letter which, like Paul's letters, has a contemporary feel to it, an immediacy, a letter which until you get some way through and you start to pick out the context could have been written last week:

"Christians are not distinguishable from other people by nationality or language or the way they dress. They do not live in cities reserved to themselves; they do not speak a special dialect; there is nothing eccentric about their way of life. Their beliefs are not the invention of some sharp, inquisitive mind, nor are they like some, slaves of this or that school of thought. They are distributed among Greek and non-Greek cities alike, according to their human lot. They conform to local usage in their dress, diet, and manner of life. Nevertheless, in their communities they do reveal some extraordinary and undeniably paradoxical attitudes. They live each in his or her own native country, but they are like pilgrims in transit. They play their full part as citizens and are content to submit to every burden as if they were resident aliens. For them, every foreign country is home, and every homeland is foreign territory... In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world."

That section from the letter to Diognetus was written about the year 150. But until it starts to talk about Greek and non-Greek cities it could have been written yesterday; and overall what it has to say is as relevant now as it was then.

Today I want to think in particular about that amazing phrase with which my quotation ended: "In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world."

It is a statement which I would want to strongly affirm and which is borne out by our readings for today.

When Peter heals the lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate of the temple in Jerusalem, it is an example from her earliest days of the Church's service of people in need, it is an example of the transformation of the world in the name of Jesus that the Church is called to bring about. It is an early example of the Church's mission to be for the world what the soul is for the body.

In the reading from the first letter of John he argues that we are children of God and that by doing what is right we *are* righteous. By doing right and living in hope we become different, we are transformed, and this helps us to transform the world, to be for the world as the soul is for the body. Our personal souls make us who we are, they are the shape of our whole life. By being God's children in the world we give the world a soul, we quicken the world. The life of Christians in the

world is to the world what the breath breathed into the dead in the valley of dry bones is to them. The life of Christians is to the world what the soul is to the body.

And in the gospel for today Luke describes how Jesus is physically risen and breathes new life into the world by breathing life into the church. When it says in today's gospel that Jesus opened his disciples' minds to understand the scriptures, we are being told about a giving of the Holy Spirit, a fresh breath of understanding and wisdom. And when Jesus tells them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations in his name, it's an instruction to proclaim not the guilt of the world but the freedom of the world from sin. What the soul is to the body, giving us freedom and freely making us who we are, Christians are to the world. And by being the soul of the world, transforming the world and proclaiming freedom in the world, Christians represent the Holy Spirit in the world, living Jesus's own life throughout the world.

But given recent events I want to ask: If Christians are to the world what the soul is to the body, why do some people in our world want to kill Christians? This relates to another sense in which I think we are realising now in a fresh way how we are contemporaries with the first Christians such as Paul and John and Diognetus, with an urgent need to proclaim Jesus's resurrection ourselves, because we all live, like them in the time of Christ.

Many dark things have been happening in our world in the last couple of years, including violence towards and murder of Christians because of their faith. In Nigeria, in Kenya, in India, in Pakistan, in Egypt, in Palestine, in North Korea, and I think most darkly, in the areas under the control of the so-called Islamic State, our brothers and sisters are being killed just for what they believe. It reminds us of another point made in the reading from John's first letter this morning: sin is lawlessness. As Jesus says in John's gospel, light has come into the world, but people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. So one of the reasons we must believe that Christians are for the world as the soul is for the body is because it is our Christian way of resisting the forces of darkness that at this moment still threaten to overwhelm us.

I said earlier how our soul is the form – the shape or the story – of our whole life. One of the ways in which Islamic State is working to bring darkness is by working to obliterate the story of the world's life. The appalling vandalism of Nimrud and other sites is about Islamic State wanting to erase the history of humanity, and turn humanity from the light – from the truth, from wisdom, from compassion, from love – towards utter darkness.

I put that reflection in the middle of my sermon because it would be wrong to end on such a note. We have to name darkness sometimes in church – just like we name our own darkness when we confess our sins – but we must always be turning towards the light, towards taking hold of the idea that we are the soul of the world, building the way we live and what we do for the world and for others around that idea.

It is also important to say that I am not trying to argue in an exclusive way here. We could say 'What the soul is to the body, people with love at the centre of their lives are to the world'. We could say 'What the soul is to the body, people who generously give money, time and practical assistance to others are to the world. We could say 'What the soul is to the body, people who faithfully believe in God are to the world.' I believe all these statements are true. You can faithfully believe in God, generously give of yourself and have love at the centre of your life and not be Christian – and you can generously give of yourself and have love at the centre of your life and not be religious at all –

and your life and the life of your community might then be said to be to the world as the soul is to the body. But we can't be completely general, we have to be specific (after all, Jesus was pretty specific, pretty situated – both before and after his death and resurrection) and being specific we should be willing to say: What the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world, whoever else is also able to quicken and enchant the world the way Christians do.

What is the substance of my claim that Christians are indeed to the world as the soul is to the body?

Many examples could be given, but historically Christianity has given to the world: the championship of human rights, the existence of modern science, whole educational systems, the abolition of slavery, the end of apartheid, and the end of American segregation. Innumerable charities and international aid organisations have come out of Christianity: Christian Aid, of course, but also Oxfam, Amnesty International, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Samaritans, the Children's Society, CAFOD, the Red Cross, the hospice movement. And now Christian Aid is working to put some soul into the General Election with its own manifesto.

The Living Wage is a live issue in this election – why? Because of an organisation called London Citizens. And what lies behind the success of London Citizens? A variety of factors but primarily that its core consists of Christians working with other faiths and trades unions for the good of the whole community. Where does the success of London Citizens come from? From what one leading figure has called 'the associative power of faith organisations' – the power of faith organisations to bring about positive change for all, because they can be to the world what the soul is to the body. Also nowadays the role which Christians are playing in food banks, homelessness charities, credit agencies, speak to the same way in which Christians are for the world what the soul is for the body. So, what the soul is to the body, Christians (among others) are to the world and we should affirm and celebrate that fact, and commit ourselves to live as the soul of the world as far as we are ourselves able. Amen.