

**Using our Bodies Faithfully:
Christian friendship and the life of worship**

Friendship is something that we do with our bodies. It is a way of placing ourselves within creation wherein we adopt a posture of love and humility and seek to receive that which is offered to us by God and by others. Likewise worship is something that we do with our bodies. Worship occurs when we position our bodies in particular ways before the Creator and allow the Spirit to open our hearts to the transforming rhythm of God's intentions.

Bodies matter.

Stephen Post describes Western people as hypercognitive¹. We are a people who have a tendency to highlight and value intellect and cognition over such things as friendship, community and love. Western people prioritise the mind over the body; matter over spirit. As hypercognitive Westerner people we are forever tempted to submit the body to the power of the mind, assuming that thinking is the place where we gain true knowledge of the world and of God. But of course, thinking is not something that we do apart from our bodies. We need our bodies in order to think. Indeed the shape and form of our bodies shapes our thinking right down to the biological level. The very shape of our brains is moulded and formed not simply by our thinking, but by the whole of our experiences in the world. Unlike hair, teeth or eyes which function according to a preordained genetic plan, our brains develop in rhythm with our experiences². As we encounter the world and one another within it, so these experiences are literally etched on our brains. The neurones and synapses don't simply record our experiences. They are shaped and formed by our encounters with the world. In a quite literal sense our bodies are precisely the shape of our experience of the world. As Pierre Bourdieu has aptly pointed out, we carry our cultures in our bodies³.

Bodies matter to Christians. At the heart of our faith is the broken body of Jesus. It is as we look upon the damaged body of Jesus on the cross that we come to realise that God is and remains embodied. It is in the wounded body of Jesus; amongst the blood and the incapacitation of the cross that our redemption is wrought out. The surprise of the resurrection (apart from the obvious) is that Jesus's wounds remain a part of his resurrected body⁴. This indicates many things, but at a minimum, it suggests that standard perceptions of

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our post resurrection experience referring to a complete replacement of our current bodies or a movement from the physical to the immaterial are flawed. The bodies that we have just now have something of eternal significance. Scripture does not tell us what that means or how that could be, only that that is so. Our bodies matter now, and for ever.

In this paper I will offer a perspective on the body, on Christian worship and on Christ-like friendship, that will enable us to see the power and importance of Spirit-filled bodies for the tasks that Jesus has for us in-the-now and in the eschaton. In developing a theology of the liturgical body I will engage with the experience of people whose bodies are considered to be different either because of damage, deterioration or genetic differences. In exploring difference within the Body of Christ we will be able to come to an understanding to the radicalness of Christian friendship and the day-to-day power of worship.

The communal nature of Christian bodies

The place that we need to begin is with a deceptively simple observation: *being a Christian is something that we do together*. At first glance this may seem rather obvious. However, a deeper reflection reveals it to be a deep and crucial anthropological and Christological observation. When I say that "being a Christian is something that we do together," I don't mean that it is a series of tasks that we engage in as individuals who happen to be together within a particular geographical space. I mean that the very process of being a Christian and indeed of being human is communal right down to its core. Hypercognitive Western people feel that they are individuals. But such a feeling is illusory. We are deeply dependant creatures. At a basic human level, our dependency on one another is remarkably obvious if not always recognised. Despite our cultural mantra of "I think therefore I am;" a mode of self-perceptions that assumes autonomy, freedom and independence, we are inevitably dependant on one another at an individual, social and political level. The recent banking crisis has shown us that we are not only interdependent across national boundaries, but also that money – the thing that seems to drive all of humanity - does not in fact exist. The African phrase "I am because we are," is in fact much closer to the truth⁵.

But as Christians we discover another dimension to our inter-dependence. Within the Body of Christ there literally is no "I," only "we." Put slightly differently, within the Kingdom of God, the idea that "I" am an individual makes no sense. Such a suggestion is inevitably dissonant with Western understandings and perceptions of self and what it means

5

to be 'me.' The suggestion that there is no "I," only "we" raises questions. How can "I" be "we." Of course "I" am "me!" And yet that is exactly what the apostle Paul seems to indicate in his imagery of the church as the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 3: 16 he says:

"Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?"

"All of you *together*." The body of Christ is not intended as a metaphor. It is a physical reality. It is something that creatures are called to do with their bodies. Richard Hays notes that:

By identifying the many members of the church directly with Christ, Paul seems to press beyond mere analogy to make an ontological equation of the church with Christ⁶.

Those who follow Jesus and are baptised into his body are in Christ, not in a metaphorical sense, but in a real sense. As we engage with one another, so we engage with Jesus. We cannot be who we are without the other members who form the body of Jesus. We are not who we are when we stand alone. We are only who we are when we are together in Christ.

But we are not simply together. The body of Christ is not like a football match or a community gathering. We are together "*in Christ*." Paul frequently uses "in Christ" language to express the true place of the churches' identity⁷. Again this is not a metaphor. Who we are can only be fully understood as we perceive ourselves in relation to Jesus. My history, my present experience and future hopes can only be understood as they relate to and are seen in the light of Jesus. For Paul Christian bodies do not have any integral individuality⁸. Who we are is who we are in Christ⁹. In the body of Christ we are one. Within such a body Elizabeth Kent observes:

Our bodies should not be an autonomous project of self actualization. The radical disruption of Scripture calls us to understand the individual bodies as primarily part of the body of Christ. In sharp contrast to the secular culture which enshrines the autonomous individual body, and at variance with evangelicals who have appropriated that same concept, the challenge to view our own bodies through the lens of participation in the body of Christ subverts what we have been led to believe the body is for¹⁰.

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⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:12-24

⁸ Reference to Martin

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¹⁰ P. 116

As we are baptised into the Body, so we lose ownership of our own bodies and become one body in Christ. It is not that our individual bodies cease to matter. They actually become more important as they find their true telos. As we lose ownership of our own bodies, so we begin to discover what the bodies that we inhabit are actually for. Our bodies are in Jesus and for Jesus. Beginning to think of ourselves in such interconnected ways opens up some new possibilities and some deep challenges. Paul rips away the veil of independence and individuality and challenges us to think corporately and Christologically about who we are and what we should be doing with our bodies.

Unity in diversity: Places of belonging

Within the body of Jesus there is a deep and necessary diversity. Within Christ's body people are not treated equally. Equality is an elusive and difficult concept. If we were, for example, to treat people with advanced dementia equally – in the way we treat people who do not share this experience – then we would create a situation of deep injustice and oddly, profound inequality. Equality is a political term that requires theological nuance. *Within Jesus's body diversity is the new norm and respect for diversity is the assumed mind-set*. Human beings in all of their diversity find their unity in Christ. As people are baptised into the body of Christ, so they enter into a space of deep *belonging*. To belong one needs to be perceived as invaluable and absolutely necessary for the functioning of the community. People need to miss you when you are not there. The body of Christ is a place of belonging. The body cannot be the body without the hand; it cannot be complete without the little toe! If the left arm tries to be the right arm the body will suffer until the left arm finds its vocation and settles into its lefthandedness. The diversity of Jesus' body is inevitable and necessary. But such diversity is not held together by equality, but by deep belonging.

God with us

We do however have to be careful and clear as to the nature of the relationality within the body of Christ. It is not a side issue that in the body we become who we are "in Christ." It is as Jesus comes to us and chooses to relate to us that we are drawn into his body. The interconnectivity between God and human beings should not be mistaken for a relationship of mutuality. David Kelsey notes that

What Christians claim about humankind that nobody else does is that the triune God relates to humankind, and to all else, to create it, to draw it to eschatological consummation, and, when it is estranged, to reconcile it¹¹.

Kelsey's point is that the key issue for Christians is not that they relate to God, but that God relates to them. The relationality within the body of Christ is not equal. Scripture consistently tells a story of God relating to that which is not God; to a "reality other than God"¹². The relationship between God and creatures is not static and is not like other relationships that human beings engage in. This inequality between human and Divine relationships is very important. Not only is there a difference between God relating to humans and humans relating to God, Kelsey also points out that:

The Christian claim is that humankind's relating to God is generally not congruent with, nor an appropriate response to, God's relating to humankind. That is, human relating to God is generally sinful. To declare abstractly that human creatures have the property of "God-relatedness" simply obscures the distinction between God relating to us and our relating to God. What makes Christian anthropology *theological* is that it is ruled by claims about God relating to us. More exactly, it is ruled by claims about the *triune* God relating to us. Such anthropology must be theocentric. Only in and from that context should we derive claims about our relating to God. Speaking of "God relating" rather than about "the God relation" brings that out¹³.

Kelsey's point is important for two reasons, one theological and one practical. The theological point is vital. To suggest that human beings have some kind of inherent property that constitutes their 'God-relatedness' is an *anthropological* statement, not a *theological* statement. More, it is a statement about human beings that misses the point of the biblical narrative that indicates that it is 'God's relating' that should be perceived as the primary theological dynamic. Humans can relate to God, but only within the context of God's primary relational dynamic and an acknowledgement of human sinfulness.

The practical dimension to Kelsey's observations is crucial for current purposes. If human understandings of what it means to relate to God provide the primary relational dynamic within which human and Divine interactions are presumed to occur, then our understandings of what it means to relate to God will be bound up in human expectations and human sinfulness. In other words, if our perspective on what it means to relate to God comes from a human point of view, then it will be bound by what humans think relating to God means. But, if our understanding of what it means to relate to God comes from a Divine point

¹¹ P. 142

¹² P. 142

¹³ P. 143

of view, then a whole new range of options emerge. Not noticing this tension between God relating to us and us relating to God sits at the heart of controversies over whether or not people with profound intellectual disabilities or people with advanced dementia, can relate to God, or should be allowed to participate in the rituals and practices of faith. The presumption is that we need to know something or do something in order to relate to God. Relating becomes a human enterprise. However, in framing the issue in the way Kelsey does, leaves conceptual room for "stressing that "God actively relating" is said in several senses, not one¹⁴. Put slightly differently, the love that binds and holds the body of Christ; the active relating love of God, is not univocal; it doesn't have a single voice. Because the initiative is always God's and because God relational activities¹⁵, are multivocal (have many voices and cadences), all of the members of God's body should always be safe. God relates to all members of the body in ways that are simultaneously diverse and unified. The body of Christ is a place of participation, difference and acceptance.

No room at God's table

An example will help to make the point. A few years ago a colleague of mine who has a daughter with Down's syndrome attended a church in the north of Scotland. His daughter was a very active member of the church and engaged enthusiastically in all dimensions of worship in their own congregation. The day that they attended worship was the time of communion, of eucharist. When the cup went round the congregation it came to my friend's daughter, her name is Jane. She was about to take the sacrament when suddenly the minister in a very loud voice shouted "don't let that woman take the sacrament! She will defile it." Now, it is difficult to gauge precisely what the minister's problem was apart from bad manners and rudeness. Presumably he had in mind Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11: 29: "For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves." A generous reading of the situation would be that he was trying to protect her from engaging in a dangerous spiritual practice. It would be interesting to know if he treated all of his visitors like this, or whether his "care" and "concern," was reserved for those who looked different from others in the gathering. A less generous reading of the situation would be that he assumed that Jane was unable to understand the sacrament and by implication understand and relate to God in standard ways. This is not the place for me to get into the

¹⁴ P. 143

¹⁵ P. 143

complexities of sacramental participation and exclusion from God's table¹⁶. Suffice to point out that if my less generous reading is correct, the minister's thinking and response was carried out at the level of *anthropology*, not theology. The assumption being that Jane had to know something before she could relate to God. However, at a theological level, there is no reason why a God who relates in the midst of human diversity cannot relate to June with all of her differences. Relatedness within the body of Christ is diverse, loving, accepting and above all gifted. All of the members may not understand or accept the gift in the same way, but then again God does not give the gift in the same way to every member. If we begin to think theologically rather than anthropologically about the body of Christ things look different.

The soulfulness of the body

God's offer of relationship is thus seen to be a gift that cannot be emulated by human beings. It can however be lived in, as we live within the body of Jesus. We live into God's graceful gift of relationship. God's relating is therefore a transformative gift that moves people closer to Jesus and thus closer to the image of God whom Paul informs us *is* Jesus¹⁷. We will see in a moment that the body of Christ is vital for an understanding of the context for Christian friendship and faithful worship. But before we do so, we need to spend a little time reflecting on the nature of the bodies that comprise the body of Christ. *Human bodies are holy places*. In Genesis 2:7 we find a description of the origins of human beings:

And the LORD God formed man [of] the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (KJV)

God breathes God's breath into human beings and they move from being inanimate dust to living beings. This is why St. Augustine described human beings as *terra animata*, "animated earth"¹⁸. Human beings are thus seen to be created from matter, but inspired/given breath/brought into living existence by the very breath of God. If that is the case then something very powerful begins to emerge. *We are our bodies as we are our souls*. As earth animated by the breath of God, human beings are seen to be, as Wendell Berry has put it: "holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy"¹⁹. Put slightly differently, Every-Body is holy. That is not to suggest that humans are holy in and of

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¹⁷ Colossians 1:15-17

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themselves. They are holy because the breath of God who is Holy resides within them and sustains them. This of course has an immediate implication. Attending to God's creatures is in fact a mode of attending to God. As we minister to one another in love and friendship so we also minister to God. *Friendship is worship; community is soul work*.

That is not to suggest that we should look beyond or around each other in a search for God. This is precisely what Luther felt that people were doing with regard to the cross of Jesus. His theology of the cross forces people to look *at* the cross, to look *at* Jesus²⁰. We don't look over or around the person before us, searching for God. God is in the midst of all that we do and all that we are. God is a gentle, inspiring presence that creates us, holds us, and invites us to see the holiness of others. Each human encounter is an opportunity of worship; for placing our bodies in particular ways before God and for the other. Worship in this sense is a celebration of human bodies; a repositioning of the brokenness of humanity and a place where the body of Christ can take shape and form as it seeks to respond faithfully to the calling of Jesus. Human encounter is a celebration of the body and a meeting of souls. Within this context every-body has a place. Whilst there may be powerful liturgical moments where we formally engage in the rituals and practices of our faith within the geographical boundaries of our churches, worship conceived in the day-to-dayness of human encounter opens up a space for a *liturgy of the everyday*. Such a liturgy draws attention to the sacrament of the present moment; a way of looking at and living in the world wherein we recognise that each moment is a gift and that the movements of our bodies in the world and the cadence of our spirits, provide the context for the liturgy of our lives.

Worshipping with our bodies

If we take this way of being in the world into our encounters with people who have advanced dementia, the power of the body emerges in surprising ways. For many years I worked alongside of people living with advanced dementia. There are many tales that I could tell, but I just want us to concentrate on worship. One of the startling things about spending time with people who have advanced dementia is the ways in which they respond to worship. People who have very little response during the week will often spring into life when they hear the Lord's prayer, a hymn or are invited to participate in the sacraments. Some would argue that this is just well engrained cognitive memory. It may well be that that is an aspect

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of the story. But there is more. People's movements in the context of worship are a manifestation of memory: *the memory of their bodies*. There is a burgeoning literature that makes the case that we not only recall our memories; bringing things from the past into the present with a view to planning the future. We also *embody* our memories²¹. Our memories are not simply brought from the past into the present; they are actually embodied and worked out *in* the present through our bodily practices. Many of the folks with whom I worked were Christians. Many of them had forgotten Jesus, at least at a cognitive level. This raises an interesting question: *What does it mean to know and to love Jesus when you have forgotten who he is?* But they remembered Jesus, in their bodies. Over time these people had been shaped, formed and educated in the practices of the church. They were not simply "I" people, they had become "we" people. Their bodies contained and acted out the body of Christ in worship. As I have written elsewhere, over time:

their bodies had been shaped and formed by faithfully practising the memory of Jesus over many years. They could not recall who Jesus was, but their love for Jesus and their memory of him; their faithfulness over time was made manifest in their bodies and was obvious if people had eyes to see. Viewed in this way, their frail movements, the taking of the bread and the wine, their fragile embrace, the apparently unknowing sharing in the words of the ritual are reflective not of loss but of enduring love. They represent the habits of a lifetime inscribed by Jesus on the bodies of those who love and, in an odd way, remember Jesus "in the now" in ways that do not require recall or cognition. They know and remember Jesus in their bodies²².

In order to notice such beautiful things, we need to be able to look at our bodies properly. When we learn to see the holiness of even the most broken body, we act differently; we function generously and gently. We become people who can be trusted with the welfare of others. We become not just servants to the disabled; we become friends: heart to heart, soul to soul. Servants have a sense of "I"ness (distance); friends are bound in "We"ness (intimacy).

Christ like friendship

And that movement from servants who seek to offer care, to friends that seek to offer love, takes me to the final part of my paper. The designation that scripture uses to name the faithful bodies that make up the body of Christ is *friends*. When in John 15:15 Jesus says to his disciples "I no longer call you servants, now I call you friends" the disciples are given a

radically new identity. Now they are not simply followers of Jesus, they are friends of God. But what might such friendship look like.

A number of years ago I wrote a book called *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the care of people with severe mental health problems*²³. It was an extended reflection on the experiences of people living with schizophrenia and the role of Christian friendship in their spiritual recovery²⁴. In concluding this lecture I want to reprise some of the argument of that book in the service of putting some flesh to the type of relationship I have been pushing for thus far.

One of the strange things about Western friendships is that they are pretty exclusive. If we look at our social circles, most of our friends tend to be remarkably similar to ourselves. We share certain beliefs, do things that we like together, share interests and so forth. The basic approach is based on an intuitive Aristotelian principle of like attracts like²⁵. We relate to one another more or less in the same way as we do our economics, that is, according to a principle of social exchange: You give me an adequate amount of social and emotional goods and I will do the same. As long as we retain the equilibrium of the exchange I will remain your friend. But if you can't or won't satisfy me or can't afford to give me what I need, then I will find friends elsewhere. We assume that friendship is a choice based on utility. Such a structure makes it very difficult for us to imagine what it might look like to become friends with someone who seems in many ways very different from who we are. Put slightly differently, there is a reason why many people do not want to spend time with people who have visible or invisible disabilities: *we have been taught not to*. Many of us simply don't have the relational sensitivities that would enable us to deal creatively with relational difference. I remember one young man with whom I worked who had enduring schizophrenia. He had just been successfully hooked up with a befriending scheme. It was working quite well and he said to me: "you know John, I am 24 years old and this is the first time that I have had a friend who has not been paid to be my friend²⁶." That strikes me as quote profound. Deep loneliness marks the experience of many people with mental health issues. One has to wonder where the community of Jesus' friends is in the midst of such loneliness and isolation?

The friendships of Jesus.

However, the friendships of Jesus run in a different direction. The principle of the incarnation is that God who is radically unlike human beings, takes the form of human beings and offers them friendship. Jesus who is God offers friendship to the disciples. Now, here we can find a slight critique of Kelsey's idea of the unidirectional nature of God's relating. It is the case that scripture is clear about God's relating dynamic. Nevertheless, the incarnation does seem to open up a space for a slightly different form of relationship; one in which human beings can have a degree of mutuality with Jesus. Although we can't develop it here, the solution to this apparent tension lies in exploring and realising the full breadth of the trinity and taking seriously both the humanness and the divines of Jesus¹.

The point I want to develop here is the way in which Jesus' relational dynamic grounded itself. Jesus sat with those folks that society did not want to sit with. He sat with the marginalised, the rejected, the unfriended to use a Facebook term! So the principle that we see in the friendships of Jesus is a 'principle of Grace' that refuses to be bound by a 'principle of likeness.' Jesus's friendships model the kind of embodied being together that we have been reflecting on thus far. Such friendship is the very stuff of the body of Christ.

Sitting with the marginalised?

But, there is one final dimension of Jesus's friendships that we must take a little time to reflect upon. Often we think of Jesus' ministry as being with and for the marginalised. Such a perception, I would suggest, is a mistake. Think of it in this way. Jesus who is God enters into relationships of friendship with those whom society has marginalised. But in doing so Jesus shifts the margins. The religious community continues to carry out the rituals and practices that they think bring them closer to God. But God is somewhere else: with those whom they have marginalised: with Jesus. So it turns out that it is the religious folks that are marginalised because they could not understand the significance of those whom they chose to reject. My fear is that precisely the same thing happens today in relation to issues of disability and difference. When churches fail to see the significance of working to include those with different needs, different bodies and different experiences, they find themselves marginalised from Jesus. Working to create communities of belonging which truly represent Jesus' body is not simply a good and proper thing to do. It is vital for the future of the church. If the church truly wants to be the body of Jesus, perhaps it needs to recognise its own alienation and embrace the fullness of Jesus' body in ways that are hospitable, faithful and friendly. On that day, the body will be whole.