

## Romans 12:4-8 A witnessing community

Paul longed that God's people the Jews might come to the knowledge of the salvation there is in Jesus (Romans 9:2-3, 10:1). Although some Jews, including Paul himself, had accepted Jesus as Messiah, as we know, most didn't. Paul was concerned about the witness of the many, many Gentiles Christians in Rome, whose witness seems to have become tainted with arrogance. After counselling them not to think of themselves more highly than they ought (Romans 12:3), he reminded them they were part of the body of Christ (Romans 12:4-5). If God's grace doesn't keep us humble being part of the body of Christ will!

The idea of "the body" as an association of people working together was common in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, for example, associations based on a trade or politics. But for Paul this association was based on being *in Christ* (Romans 12:5 also, 1Corinthians 12:13). Hot coals stay hot only if they stay together. We are only complete as human beings in relationship with God our Father and within the believing community where he has placed us (Genesis 2:18, Psalm 68:6).

The heart of the Christian community is to be not only a worshipping community but also a witnessing community (Acts 1:8). The body is a powerful metaphor for community because it illustrates an amazing harmony. There are many parts of the body, and they are different, with different functions. Yet, all the different parts of the body work together. When this is happening in the Christian community it is a tremendous witness to Christ. We have different gifts according to the grace given us (Romans 12:6), and each person is an essential part of the body (1Corinthians 12:27). There are no vestigial organs! In 1Corinthians 12, where Paul teaches more extensively on the body of Christ, he points out we should not compare ourselves with other parts of the body (1Corinthians 12:14); and we should not say we have no need for other Christians (1Corinthians 12:21). The eye sees where the car is going, but the hands and feet are needed to drive it! More than ever we need the good witness of the body of Christ in our communities (Ephesians 4:16).

The cultural backdrop of the Christians in Rome was very similar to our own cultural backdrop. Paul described the decadence and corruption of the Roman world in Romans 1, which was a culture that had descended into lust and lawlessness and homosexual practice. It started by defying God as Creator, even though God's eternal power is obvious from the beauty of creation, *but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened* (Romans 1:21). The decadence of the Roman society, as with all societies that choose this path, led eventually collapsed from within. We are facing a very similar situation. We have discarded God from our culture, and we have poisoned ourselves with the false teachings of atheism. Now, on the one hand, we face the external threat of Islamic terrorism; and on the other hand we face the danger of internal collapse.

Is there any hope? We read in Isaiah 53 how the prophet Isaiah foretold that the Messiah who *took up our pain and bore our suffering* (Isaiah 53:4). We read about a Saviour who was *pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed*. (Isaiah 53:5). This is the hope of every person and the only hope for our nation.

The clear message of Romans 11 and 12 is that God has a remnant of His people called the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ, called to witness by our community life together. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which means, *a called-out assembly or congregation*. We are called out by God. Without God's calling there's no assembly / church. But God calls and forms his church: *He is the Potter, we are the clay*. The same was true for Israel. Not all Israel was Israel (Romans 9:6), but God always had

a remnant chosen by grace. In his own day Isaiah had a word for this remnant chosen by grace, which I believe is a word for us also.

**Isaiah 44:1-5** *"But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. (See all 44:1-5, and also 44:21-23.)*

The PM Mrs May has been presenting herself this week as strong and stable and certain. But the reality is that we are entering a period in this country of weakness, instability and of great uncertainty – a period of darkness. But the good news is that when the darkness is darker, the light shines brighter. This is God's promise of hope. Our calling is to be a light, to be His witnesses in the darkness (Matthew 5:14)

But how can we be a light. Not by striving, or even just doing things differently, or by trying to be good. The prophet Zechariah (in Zechariah 4) had a vision of a golden lampstand. It was a vision of the menorah (lampstand with seven lamps on it) which was placed in the tabernacle. The menorah was to give light in the tabernacle continually (Leviticus 24:1-4). The lamps were kept burning with a supply of pure oil. Then Zechariah said, *'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit' says the Lord* (Zechariah 4:6). It is the Lord who supplies the oil of the Spirit; we need to be like the wise virgins who kept their lamps burning (Matthew 25:4).

Lynn Green, General Secretary of the BU, put it this way,

*Our calling from Christ to go and make disciples must begin and continue in prayer. One minister from one of our larger churches shared with me his concern that the church was not seeing growth through conversion. His conclusion was that programmes can only do so much; what the church really needed was to seriously seek God in prayer and have a hunger for Him that would flow out in authentic daily witness. We live in the midst of an era where we are seeing huge changes and I believe that God is shaking the nations. As other generations before us have done, we need to cry out to the Lord in prayer, and sacrificially align ourselves with His Kingdom purposes. Our response to the challenges and opportunities we face must always be the prayerful pursuit of Christlikeness.*

Like the Psalmist, we need a hunger for Him (Psalm 42:1-2). But this thirst needs to flow out in daily authentic witness. We need to use the gifts God has given to serve him as we are able. Maybe God wants to release you in to gifts you are not using much, or you didn't know you had.

Paul emphasises that we should use the gifts God has given (Romans 12:6), not hide our light under a bushel. We can all encourage others, but for some people just ooze encouragement: they have the gift of encouragement. We can and should all give, but some have a particular gift of giving. These gifts are not limited to those in full-time ministry. Sometimes too much emphasis on the pulpit ministry can limit these other gifts. Teaching gifts are vital, not just to the larger congregation. The gift of teaching can be used in small groups and one on one. Some are particularly gifted in teaching children. Leadership is not only for pastor and deacons, but is a gift needed in different areas of organisation, like on our cleaning day! Serving isn't only a gift for deacons, even though it's the same root word. Some people have a particular ability to see the needs of others, or showing mercy.

These different parts of the body do not have the same function, but they are all part of God's remnant chosen by grace, the body of Christ, called to stand in this hour.