

Holy Spirit of Truth; enlighten our minds and open our hearts that we might have the courage to live together in your love, this day and always. Amen.

26 January 2025 3rd of Epiphany

Readings

A reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

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The Gospel according to St Luke (Luke 4:14-21)

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

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SERMON

In late 2020, the Bishop of Washington was approached by a publisher and asked to write a book on being brave. She had come to public attention in June of that year after the National Guard had cleared Lafayette Square of protesters following the unlawful killing of George Floyd. This was so that president Donald Trump could climb the steps of St John Episcopal Church, holding a bible in his hand, for a photoshoot. At that time, that Bishop, Mariann Edgar Budde, expressed her outrage at the lack of compassion for the grieving and the misuse of sacred symbols and space to demonstrate political power.

In 2023 her slim paperback was published, “How we learn to be Brave”. At the book launch Mariann Edgar Budde expressed her understanding of courage, which was, for her, the outworking of being authentic and true to one’s values. She had learned that courage has come from daring to stand in truth, and builds up gradually. Being honest with ourselves and others requires bravery, but each time we hold our ground when challenged we are more equipped for the next occasion. We become courageous over time.

She explained how in June 2020, after years of steady commitment to being authentic, she could do no other than speak out from her privileged position as Bishop where her voice would be heard.

On Tuesday morning in Washington National Cathedral, the newly inaugurated President and his entourage attended the interfaith prayer service which traditionally concludes the presidential inauguration. Having been scheduled to be the preacher, Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde delivered her sermon to a packed cathedral. She focused on the theme of unity.

Our first reading from the letter to the Corinthians today highlights the unity of a Christian community which has been transformed by the Holy Spirit. Paul likens a Spirit filled people to a body made up of diverse parts, with no part being of more value than another. Paul is addressing a new rapidly growing congregation, where divisions are appearing. It seems some people are setting themselves up as more important than others. Paul is having none of this.

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Paul reminds the Corinthians they were all given the Holy Spirit to drink, suggesting that there some choice in inviting the Spirit into our lives. Drawing a comparison with a healthy body of many parts, he is indicating what happens if we do drink, and allow the Spirit to dwell in us; our hearts are changed in a profound way. Gradually, we see the world differently, noticing beauty and commonality in people different to us. We begin to recognise the deep worth of others. We see relationship over and above difference, while at the same time rejoicing in our diversity. We recognise how much we need each other, how much the whole would be diminished without any one of us. The Holy Spirit moves us to include and welcome, rather than protect and guard our perimeter.

As Paul explains, racial and cultural divides make no sense at all when we are blessed by this insight. In community we discover our true spiritual home. However, letting the Holy Spirit of Truth move within us is no easy process. As we are drawn to look inward with an increasingly authentic gaze, we may discover we have walked in upon an inner battle ground. In that uncompromising light are revealed powerful drives to prioritise ourselves and our tribe, guard our resources and shore up our personal boundaries. But by being brave, gradually, courageous act by courageous act, we find the ability to override these self-centred demands. We gain the confidence to say no to those very persuasive inner voices which threaten to deflect us from the direction of our true calling, which is into a life of community in which every member is of value.

The Bishop, appearing as a tiny figure in the vast stone Cathedral pulpit, asserted that unity has three foundations; honouring the inherent dignity of every human being, being honest with each other, and inhabiting humility. She explained that the opposites of these virtues, contempt, falsity, and grandiosity, all dangerously jeopardise this unity, this most crucial foundation of a flourishing nation.

In my opinion this was beautifully delivered Christian argument, rounded and complete in itself. However, in the final two minutes, the Bishop shifted gear.

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She directed her sermon to the President. With some fear now apparent, she held herself still and her voice remained calm. She asked him gently for mercy, for those who fear for their lives, naming gay, lesbian and trans children, immigrants and refugees. It was a brave act, arguably foolhardy, and already it has come at some cost. Her words, whilst supported by many as speaking “truth to power”, have sparked outrage in countless others, including those in powerful positions.

The Holy Spirit, when it moves, can disturb and inflame the self-protective and tribal instincts in all of us, and if we are unaware that these are active within us, then the reaction is to attack and wish to silence the source of the disturbance.

In the Gospel reading today, we have heard another courageous speech, this time in a synagogue in 1st century Nazareth. Jesus has recently returned to Galilee from the wilderness, and already rumours are spreading about how this son of a Nazareth carpenter has changed. It is as if his preaching is on fire.

When Jesus stood up to read from the prophets, everyone was captivated by the familiar words of Isaiah delivered so passionately as if they were new to their ears. The words which speak about the Messiah, the long-awaited hope of the Jewish people, the one who will bring in righteousness and justice and freedom for God’s chosen ones.

And this also was a sermon in two parts. With careful focus, Jesus rolls up the scroll and sits down. There is silence. It’s clear this drama isn’t over. Gazing intently around, Jesus speaks again. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

Gradually people realise Jesus is referring to himself. This son of Joseph now appears possessed by a spirit of blasphemy. Luke goes on to tell us the story of that day doesn’t end there. The elders are outraged. A mob forms and, filled with bloodlust, chases Jesus out of town. This man needs to die. But Luke writes that he mysteriously escapes from their grasp. This death will have to wait for another time.

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This narrative reveals Jesus' first and only inauguration. In this speech, the public initiation of his ministry, Jesus' promises were not met with rapturous applause, but mystified silence. There were no executive orders, because these promises can only be fulfilled only by the changing of human hearts, by the action of the Holy Spirit. This is a manifesto of liberation; for the poor and the marginalised, a speech, which like the one given in Washington Cathedral, is ultimately all about unity, a proclamation of hospitality for all, because, as the Bishop pointed out, we all need each other.

Populism often appeals to what people want – security and comfortable lifestyles which are not challenged by people different from us. But Jesus does not offer people what they want. Jesus is offering instead a way of finding what we most need; a relationship with God, with creation, and with each other, through the opening of our hearts. It is a life of “learning to be brave”, being true to ourselves and our values, even in the face of opposition.

So let us never lose hope. This is Good News. However much the world shakes with political change and conflict, The Holy Spirit of Jesus is always there for the drinking, for those who choose to drink, ever drawing us, sometimes even despite ourselves, into a loving community of people, people of courage, in which all are as one and everyone is welcome.

Amen.

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