

Reflection on session 5 of Lent series: Being Disciples by Rowan Williamson
Chapter 5 Faith in Society

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by^[a] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

I Corinthians 12: 12-26

Our text for this chapter is very familiar to many of us and I believe Rowan Williams has chosen it because it encapsulates the essence of Christian discipleship: we are all equal and valuable in God’s eyes. We all have something of our uniqueness and God-given talents to bring to the table. We are all loved – **every human life has worth**. Whether our society recognizes and acknowledges that this precept is a foundational element of how our society functions, is debatable – but our ethical behaviour, laws and decisions are based on our belief in the value of **all** human life.

Over the course of millennia, society's Christian perspective has been questioned and a form of secularization originating in the credence given to the 'rational thinking', scientific perspective of the Enlightenment period took hold. One of the legacies of this period, in which people had legitimate reasons for not adhering to the status quo 'don't question authority' attitude, is a lasting mistrust of being told what to think and do. There was a seismic shift from the collective responses of society to individualism – "what I think" matters most – what we colloquially call the 'me' society. Religion and beliefs became the province of the individual with the debate being opened up in all sorts of areas, one example being, should 'religion' be on the curriculum in schools. I expect you have your own examples which come to mind. The human rights debate is high on the agenda these days – my rights over yours. Individualism has its good points – more freedom to choose – but can we be faced with too many choices? Life is complicated! We're now locked into a consumerist mindset. Even church members are sometimes referred to as consumers or punters!

In short, many would agree we've lost our (the?) way! Somehow the values of our society have become skewed and this has a knock on effect when we try to operate as Christian disciples in our current day setting.

I realized, as I was reading the book, that Williams is writing in pre-COVID times. The social 'landscape' that he writes about will have changed as we emerge from lockdown. I am sensing that we are at a 'watershed' moment in so many aspects of our lives, so I think it would be useful for us to consider what he has to say through the lens of our current situation, and, as far as we are able, to think about what the post COVID 'landscape' holds for the Christian disciple.

To return to Paul's analogy of the body of Christ in its unity and diversity, there are some salient points which Williams makes, one being that if we use this as a model for Christian living, we are promised life in all its fullness (John 10:10) The significance of this statement has been brought home to me recently. I've been reading accounts of the lives of people trying to live fulfilling lives in non-Christian cultures. They are bowed down by societal restrictions on their freedoms, traditions that go unquestioned, and much else besides. They are shackled. It makes very sombre reading – (not the best for a lockdown situation!) Jesus lived in a society bound by restrictions. How radical he must have sounded! How life-giving was his message! 'The truth shall set you free' he proclaims!

A further distillation: the ultimate truth is that '**God is love**'. All things converge to this truth. Williams translates this into the actions/attitudes we can adopt to give this truth credence in today's society:

"The Christian vision is **dynamic** – everyone is engaged in building up everyone else's human life and dignity". – stemming from an attitude of **reverence** and **thanksgiving**.

Being disciples means being called to see others, especially others in profound need, from the perspective of an eternal unflinching, unalterable **love**.

Being a **voice** (that insists on being heard!) that **questions** from a wholly different perspective, the kind of perspective that cannot be generated by corporate self-interest....a **conversation partner**....a **critical friend** to the state and its laws, **questioning** what the state takes for granted.....**challenging** the shallowness of prevailing social morality....**pushing** for change to make the state a little more like the community that it is itself representing: the kingdom of God. (*italics mine*).

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray that we might break open your word today and listen for your voice as we read and digest your word. We give thanks for all the Christian disciples who have gone before and paved the way – who have left us the legacy of their wisdom and insight, gained from their personal relationship with you. We give thanks for the modern- day scholars and interpreters of your word, who offer us the perspective of what it means to be a disciple in our current context. We give thanks that we are able to meet electronically in these lockdown days, and for the added dimension of being able to access others across the country. We thank you for the many blessings you bestow on us today and throughout our lives. We ask this in the precious name of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

St Theresa of Avila (1515-82) captures, in her prayer, the essence of what it means to be a disciple of Christ:

**Christ has no body now on earth but mine,
No hands but mine,
No feet but mine,
Mine are the eyes through which to look out on Christ's compassion to the world.
Mine are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.
Mine are the hands with which he is to bless people now.
Amen.**

Some questions to consider:

- ***How can we, individually and/or collectively be effective advocates for Christ in our modern day context, with particular reference to the situation(s) we may find ourselves in post-lockdown?***
- ***What attributes do we need? From your own experience/knowledge, can you think of concrete examples of the local Christian community demonstrating a commitment to the value and dignity of every person?***
- ***Can you think of good examples of Christian communities, locally, nationally or internationally, making an effective contribution to public debate and decision?***



Recommended topical resource:

*A series of 6 booklets produced by the Diocese of Norwich entitled 'Connect!':
contemporary crises and everyday faith.*

www.dioceseofnorwich.org/connect

Source Book: Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life. SPCK ISBN 978-0-281-07662-8