
I Have No Need of You

1 Corinthians 12.12-31a

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 21, 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Some years ago I had a colleague who had an unusual way of finishing the Sunday service. He used to bow down to the congregation. He used to say “Some clergy bow before the altar and some bow before the cross. But I’m told that these people are the body of Christ, so I bow before them.” I wonder how you’d feel if at the end of each Sunday service I bowed down to worship you, because you are the body of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul tells us that each part of the Church, each member of the Church is like an eye or an ear or a hand. The foot can’t say to the hand “I don’t need you,” nor can the eye say to the rest, “I’m the whole body.” And Paul underlines that the weaker members of the body are vital to the health and welfare of the body. What does Paul mean?

Thirty-five years ago Richard Adams published the novel *Watership Down*. *Watership Down* is a novel about rabbits. It tells the story of a dozen rabbits who search for a warren to call home. The novel is given a sharp edge by the way each of the communities the rabbits encounter has its own political system. The warren at the beginning of the novel is like a traditional, hierarchical society. The rabbits run away from that warren because they correctly anticipate it’s about to be destroyed by humans. A second warren the rabbits meet is run on a totalitarian model. There is one general who keeps all the other rabbits in a state of fear under a military regime. A third community of rabbits seems to resemble a modern decadent society. The rabbits there are somewhat inebriated. Food is plentiful and the living is easy. But the rabbits have lost the ability to find their own food and, more seriously, to tell the truth. They can’t bring themselves to acknowledge that they’re under the spell of a farmer who feeds them but also snares and kills them one by one. The fourth warren is the one the rabbits found for themselves on Watership Down.

The rabbits discover a great many things through their travels and adventures. But perhaps the most important thing they discover is that they need each other. One of the rabbits is big and strong; another is quick thinking and imaginative, a third is speedy, a fourth is fiercely loyal, a fifth is a good storyteller. Perhaps the key rabbit is the smallest and clumsiest, who yet has a sixth sense that anticipates danger – like the destruction of the original warren. What makes this group of rabbits so significant is that they find ways of using the gifts of every member of the party so that they are never short of wisdom and intelligence about what to do next or courage and strength to do what is needed. In other words the group of rabbits lives and moves and thinks as one body, rather than as a dozen separate bodies. There can’t be such a thing as an idea or a development that is good for one of the rabbits but not good for the whole body.

To be a part of a group like that group of rabbits can be a wonderful experience. One of the reasons a university encourages team sports is to give its students the opportunity to join a group that will only succeed if it has a mixture of speed, size, strength, hand-eye coordination, determination, courage and imagination, and the breakthrough comes when the members of the team realize it’s not about any one of them being the star but about each of them realizing how much they need each other. The same is broadly true for actors putting on a play, musicians participating in an orchestra and, dare I say it, singers joining a choir. The soprano doesn’t say to the alto half way through Messiah, “I have no need of you.”

So being one body is a familiar human experience. But I think this group of rabbits offers us a particular series of lessons about what it might mean to be the Church. I’m going to suggest three such lessons.

First, we can never say we’ve “made it.” The rabbits in the story are like Christians making their way through life – they are longing to get to the point where they can say “Phew – that’s it. We’ve made it.” Well, there is no such point. Teenagers long to leave home, undergraduates long to get a degree, graduates long for the Ph.D. or the first professional paycheck, faculty for tenure, parents for the first child, homeowners to pay off the mortgage, pension savers for a healthy retirement. And churches are the same. They long to pay for the new building, open the outreach program, finally get a decent preacher, and sort out the music. But the moment

never comes. And the story of the rabbits shows us why it shouldn't. Because when the dozen refugees meet the easy living rabbits who live the good life they can see quite quickly that those inebriated rabbits have lost what it takes to be a community, to tell the truth, and ultimately to survive.

The Church will always remain a pilgrim people. Whenever you meet a bunch of Christians who feel they've "made it", whether in strength of numbers, firmness of doctrine, righteousness of attitude or purity of life, you can anticipate that pretty soon they'll be in trouble. Israel was formed on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land. The disciples were formed on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. The Church becomes one body as it is bound together on its common journey. It's always a work in progress.

Seeing ourselves as a pilgrim people should help us avoid the twin temptations of identifying too strongly with our culture or sealing ourselves off from it. We can't live in this culture as if it were our permanent home. But the fact we have promises to keep elsewhere doesn't make this culture inherently bad. On the contrary the gifts God gives us for the journey don't just come from one another: they often come from strangers. The rabbits in the story receive vital help and intervention from a bird who can see things they can't and from a young girl at a farm who saves one of the rabbits from her cat. The pilgrim Church likewise must be open to receiving surprising gifts from those it might regard as strangers, like the bird, or even, like the farm girl, enemies.

Second, the diversity of the Church is a strength, not a weakness. The group of rabbits only survived because it had rabbits with different gifts, different strengths, different visions for what they were doing and where they were going. Paul says there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, varieties of ways of serving God but the same Lord. Paul may have seen it that way, but it's hardly a fashionable view among Christians today. Today we say to one another, "If you're a different color, you need to be in a different church. If you're a different gender, at least if you want to be in ministry, you need to be in a different church. If you're a different sexual orientation, you need to be in a different church. If you play music according to the custom of a different century, you need to be in a different church. If you have a rival understanding of liturgy, or the Bible, or baptism, or most ironically, spiritual gifts, you need to be in a different church."

I expect you know the story of the man who arrived on a desert island to be greeted by the sole occupant of the island. He noticed there were two buildings on the island, and asked what the first one was. "That's my church" said the sole occupant. "And the other building, over there?" asked the visitor. "That's the church I wouldn't be seen dead in." And that's the tragedy and the scandal of the contemporary church. If you asked most American Christians who the enemy is, they'd most likely say the enemy is other Christians. And the internet makes it much much worse, because there judgmental Christians using the shield of anonymity pass on hearsay and half truth about apparently ghastly things alleged to be happening in formerly respectable churches – a practice that used to be called malicious and self-righteous gossip but is now simply called blogging.

There's another well known story about a monastery where the monks were constantly at each other's throats, bickering and cursing at one another. One night a mysterious visitor knocked at the monastery door and made a brief but solemn announcement. "One of you is Jesus Christ." The atmosphere in the monastery changed over night. Suddenly each monk treated every other monk with awe and wonder, not sure which one was Jesus but knowing Jesus was among them. They had learned what it means to be church – to treat one another as we would treat Jesus, to expect from one another all that Jesus brings, to cherish one another as we cherish Jesus. And if we do this for individuals, why can we not do so for denominations, for traditions, for styles of worship and understandings of humanity different from our own?

Take one example. The Bible is made up of sixty-six books. Each is different – some are very different from one another – and one or two even seem to contradict one another. And yet almost all Christians regard the whole Bible as God's gift to the Church to reveal his character and disclose his purpose. If we take it for granted that these sixty-six books work together to reveal God, why can't we take it for granted that these thousands of denominations can also be places where God is made known? And if we can't do without any of the sixty-six books and still have all we need to know about God, how can we do without any of these other ways of being Christian? We need each other. We need each other to know God. We cannot say to one another "I have no need of you."

And the third thing we learn from the rabbits of *Watership Down* is that being one body isn't just a matter of ignoring differences, allowing tolerance to break out, and dimming the lights to a point where all the rabbits are gray. What saves the rabbits at crucial moments in the narrative is their willingness and commitment to listen to one another, to hear each other out when they have stories or worries or misgivings or hopes. Out of these curious memories and visions come the gifts that make the group of rabbits so resilient and so adaptable. So being part of a Church that is one body means taking the time to listen to one another's stories, stories of why one group felt it needed to break away and how another group came to be pushed out, stories of how one group came to regard as central an issue most others regard as peripheral, of how so many have felt that unity and truth were separable and that they could somehow make it on their own.

Being one body doesn't just mean that the eye can't say to the hand, "I have no need of you." It means that if the eye is in pain, the whole body is in pain, and the hand does whatever it can to make things better. Paul's picture isn't about bland tolerance. It's about shared direction, shared wisdom, and shared pain. Being one body is probably a lot more painful than going our separate ways. We spend a lot of our time searching around for vital things we have to do that make listening to one another's stories seem like a waste of time. But Paul says to us. "Your mission is to be one body. Your message is that Christ has made you one body. There isn't anything more important for you to rush off to."

So these are the three lessons of 1 Corinthians 12, as mirrored by the rabbits of *Watership Down*. First, we can never say we've made it. All church life is provisional. We are a pilgrim people. Second, diversity is a gift and a strength, not a weakness or a sin of unfaithfulness. Third, unity is something you have to work at, and that work is not a distraction but is at the heart of the gospel.

Of course there's one thing we don't learn from the rabbits, and that's that we're talking not about any old body but about the body of Christ. Rabbits can show us what it means to live as a body, but baptism is what shows us what it means to be the body of Christ. If we weren't interested in the unity of the Church, we shouldn't have been baptized. Telling another Christian "I have no need of you" is really telling Jesus, "I have no need of you."

Of all the Christians in the world perhaps we at Duke Chapel need to hear these words as much as any. We haven't "made it." For all our pomp and ceremony, Duke Chapel is a provisional institution dedicated to the unity of the Church. We're in no position to say to any Christian, "I have no need of you." Duke Chapel is not in any position to turn up its nose at other ways of holding and expressing faith, but is committed to receiving every other Christian tradition as an enriching gift from God. And we're committed to listening to the stories of those who see things differently, have been pushed out or felt they had to leave. Duke Chapel is not in the business of eclectic religion for those who don't want real church. It's about calling together Christians of all kinds, in all ways, across all barriers, and bringing them face to face, and holding them there in the presence of God, until they say to one another, "I need you."