

Embodiment

May 31st this year is the feast of Corpus Christi. Do I hear cries of ‘Hocus pocus!’, ‘No popery!’ from ‘low’ or quaking readers? But I am not talking about transubstantiation, which belongs in a medieval world where the sun goes round the Earth, the globe has not been circumnavigated, medicine believes in the ‘four humours’ and has not discovered the circulation of the blood. *Corpus Christi* means ‘body of Christ’.

One of the few times Paul quotes Jesus’ own words he says: ‘For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood...”’ (1 Cor 11: 23-5)

Paul pursues the idea of the body of Christ: ‘The cup of blessing which we bless isn’t it a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break isn’t it a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body because we all share the same bread’ (1 Cor 10:17).

The body of Christ becomes a body of people. Christ is the head or figurehead of a new humanity in which ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3: 28). All are of equal moral worth. Everyone *counts*.

In his book *Inventing the Individual* (p.60) Larry Siedentop points out what a revolutionary idea this was: He comments on the above quotation from Galatians: ‘Paul’s “one” signals a new transparency in human relations. Through his conception of the Christ, Paul insists on the moral equality of humans, on a status equally shared by all.’ His conception ‘overturns the assumption on which ancient thinking had hitherto rested, the assumption of natural inequality.’

This vision of humanity as one body all sharing the same bread – the body of Christ – resonates with Jesus’ vision of a ‘reign of God’ coming *on Earth*, a reign of Kindness which is good news for the poor and dispossessed. It also resonates with

the vision in Revelation of the New Jerusalem, the beautiful city where tears are wiped away, coming *down to Earth*. God as the personification of Kindness, light of the City, God embodied in Jesus, who as the Christ then embodies all humanity as one, are *ideals*, poetic visions of human potential for love and fulfilment, both personal and political. In fact, God does not act. The ‘reign’ or Christ’s *parousia* did not come upon Earth ‘in the lifetime of some of those standing here present’. It is up to us.

Paul’s conception of the body of Christ uniting Jew and Greek – all humanity – tearing down lethal fences and walls of division was revolutionary. An equally revolutionary step is necessary today to keep those aspirations potent in a secular world, which can no longer believe in supernatural beings and is bemused – sometimes repelled – by the arcane dogmatics of fundamentalism. We need Paul’s imaginative boldness to leap to the insight that *we* created these ideas – ideals – and that they remain a vitally important guiding light; to grasp that the supernatural is a creation of the human imagination or poetic genius, sift out and keep visions of hope and treasures of wisdom, and try to embody them in life on Earth.

In this issue of *Sofia* five very different writers give their own take on some aspect of ‘embodiment’ – David Paterson, Frank Regan, David Lee, Helena Woddis and Mark Dyer. They do not ignore the dark side. Frank Regan writes about *Broken Bodies in a Broken World* with ‘bodies trafficked and enslaved’ and ‘bodies queer and indecent’. Helena Woddis asks: *Why do the Abrahamic Religions Fear the Female Body and even Loathe it?*

David Lee reflects on the Eucharist (which Quakers don’t celebrate), while in his incantatory poem *Tapestry*, Roy Lockett celebrates Quakers ‘always singing’... ‘as they make new Jerusalems’, whereas they ‘reject the new Jerusalem/of guns and occupation’.

Finally, don’t forget the SOF Annual Conference in Leicester 24th -26th July on *The Necessity of Hope*. More details on page 27.