

## Lenten Sermon 2022

Mumbai, the Indian city, is the 37th largest city in the world and, if not the most populous of Indian cities, at least the second. Like most large cities it is a magnet for those living in rural districts as far as 100 kilometres and more away. People travel there to get work, to seek their fortune, to be part of a huge and bustling city. A strange thing happened to Mumbai when the Covid Pandemic hit a year ago. Shops closed, workers lost their jobs, the city ground to a halt as people retreated to their homes and dwellings.

Without work the immense army of the poor, who had moved to the city from rural districts, had no other option but to take the long journey home to the villages from which they had come, if they were to survive. More than a million people began this exodus, many of them dying on the way. The impact on the city was immediate. These people were usually ignored, largely despised, particularly if of a lower caste, and dismissed as of no significance. But these were the people who undertook the work the rich and well-off would not do.

They swept the streets in a city notorious for its public filth and squalor. They wiped down benches, tables, and chairs. They were nannies to countless children, cleaned houses, cooked food, acted as servants and messengers for the affluent. Mumbai is a city frequently flooded in the wet season. The canals and gutters get choked with debris, silt and rubbish which means that when the wet season comes the water is not carried away and the flood spreads across parks and roads into shops and dwellings. It is the uneducated workers who keep these gutters and channels clear. Without their labour the city is threatened by another disastrous monsoon season. But the workers available to do this task are gone.

The food stalls in the streets disappeared, small local tasks not done, a work force disappeared and the city came to a halt. No one to cook the food, no one to care for the children, no one to wipe down the virus afflicted restaurants or spray in the streets or clear the garbage. The wealthy and indolent well-off found themselves in crisis. They had to cope themselves, and in many cases they did not have the skill or know-how to do that. It was as if the virus lifted a large concealing screen and revealed the true state of things that our socially divided cultures do not or will not recognise. It is the small people who turn the wheels of the world while the eyes of the mighty are elsewhere.

It makes sense of what seems the greatest cliché of all. 'We are all in this together'. I have images of a small tired middle-aged woman wiping down ledges. Of those who, every hour, 24 hours a day, collect samples from sewerage ponds, of exhausted medical staff rising again to a double shift, of food being delivered on small motor bikes to aged shut-ins, and I am reminded again of what St Paul wrote. All of us have a role to play. In the image he used of the body of Christ he stated what is inescapably true. Each part has its function. Each member his or her task. Each gift valued for the good of the whole. The way we say that is, 'We are all in this together'.

Oddly it has taken a pandemic to lift the bandage from our eyes, enabling us to recognise this. For daily life is an effort to deny what is before our eyes. The less

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glamorous jobs are poorly paid, those who do them given little credit and scant respect, as if there is a scale of value in which some parts of the body are superior to other parts. Some people are of high rank and greater significance than others. I am reminded of a circumstance when, after separating people by rank and ensuring they did not mingle, a diarrhoea epidemic hit the area and everyone was forced to use the same toilets when many, choked by the volume, became dysfunctional. Much like the pandemic, everyone was reduced to the same level. It is in this circumstance that we are able to see that no matter what you did in your working life, tinker, tailor, soldier, spy, teacher, home carer, cleaner, hairdresser, builder, carpenter, dentist- whatever, you made an essential and valuable contribution to the whole.

Yet we are made to feel as if we do not matter, are of no significance, and of little account. Nothing could be further from the truth. And nothing demonstrates the words of St. Paul so dramatically as a city caught in a pandemic. We need each other.

And in the Christian community we are one in our shared faith, recognising that everyone who belongs brings a gift that enables the body to function as it should. There are here, in this company, no great and small, none more significant than anyone else. All of us use the talents and skills we have to make the whole complete. We give honour to each other even as Christ has given us honour by calling us his own.

So in this time when we continue to be subject to limitations in order to keep ourselves and others safe, read again these words we have heard today about the body of Christ. Think back over your life and celebrate what you did, and what you gave, not only in the wider community, but in this community we know as the company of the Christ. Celebrate that you belong in this company. Celebrate that you contribute to the whole your gift however small it is. And remind yourself that no one is more equal than anyone else in this community where we share together, with great delight. You are members of the body. You belong and are cherished and loved. Celebrate what you have given and what you have done, unrecognised though it may have been. And perhaps I can say, surprisingly, there is something to thank the virus for, after all.

A meditation on 1Corinthians 12:14-26