

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

MANNA: Body image
by Diana Thornton

Sunday evening 15 February 2009

Good evening and welcome to Manna. Tonight we are thinking about body image. Like David last month, I don't pretend to be an expert on the subject but it is an issue which is 'in your face' for all of us. By the end of the evening, I hope that having set out a few of the issues, and particularly by including a theological perspective, we might begin to feel better equipped to tackle the issues for ourselves and for our families.

Beauty, we are told, is in the eye of the beholder. And over the centuries, our idea of what makes for a beautiful body has changed. Some eras have emphasised the difference between the sexes - curvy and plump for the women, muscly and athletic for the men. At other times those differences are blurred skinny and androgynous for the women; fine-boned and effete for the men. Battles have been waged against our bodies with corsets which displace the inner-organs and foot-binding which stunts growth. And now we have their modern equivalents: plastic surgery, waxing and lipo-suction. In Samoa today plump women are considered beautiful. Women who would be described as mildly obese in our culture display none of the symptoms of stress which are associated with the 'condition' in the west. I've been reading threads from blogs of fat people whilst I've been preparing for tonight. The prejudice and scorn they face from society is as bad as any racism: fat equals lazy, greedy, unfit, stupid, undesirable with poor health; thin equals fit, self-controlled, clever, healthy and sexy. Like any prejudice, we may not even notice that we do it. We may think that we're making progress with films like Kung-Fu Panda, which make us laugh at fat people and then feel guilty about doing so, but they do not actually help to turn the tables whilst they maintain the jokes. Until we see role models of different ages and body shapes, then prejudice remains unchallenged and the urge to conform is bolstered.

When we say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the saying has generally conveyed a sense of benevolence. It carries the idea that beauty is not an objective state to be attained but is a complex response which takes in a whole person. Our culture has turned this on its head. Our perception of beauty has been ripped from the eye of the beholder and is instead thrust in our faces as an ideal to be achieved. Instead of appreciating beauty we become consumers of a commodity. The ideal is imposed with a ferocious uniformity and policed with bitchy delight. The headlines of magazines deride famous women for not having regained their pre-pregnancy figures after 3 months. A free newspaper I read on the tube devoted half a page to the fact that Victoria Beckham had streaks in her fake tan round her ankles. They had blown up the photo and provided helpful arrows to make sure we could take part fully in the disgust. No wonder the rest of us don't dare to go swimming unless we've waxed our legs.

So what does this do to our society and to our children? I'm going to play you a clip from Youtube in which Mary Pipher, an American academic, speaks about her book 'Reviving Ophelia: saving the selves of adolescent girls'. You may not agree with all

that she says and we'll take a few minutes break after the film to think about the issues she raises.

Here are the questions we discussed:

- Do you agree with Pipher that weakened parental relationships lead to increased importance of body image for teenagers?
- What about the boys?
- 'Cultural change is a million acts of individual courage and human kindness... You're a change agent, I'm a change agent.' What would you want to change? How might you act?

So why do we do it? What is at the root of this 'poisonous atmosphere' as Pipher calls it? Well feminist writers might say it's a battle of the sexes: that by reducing the visible signs of a woman's fertility – large breasts and rounded hips, men have effectively limited the power which women have over them – the ability to have babies. But I don't think that body image is so easily divided along gender lines. Men too are subjected to images in the media which portray an unattainable ideal. Others might say that in our desperate desire to be liked and loved we seek to conform. We iron out any irregularities which might make us vulnerable to being disliked. This keys into our deepest fears of being unloved and alone. The imagery we consume also strongly links sex with body-shape. Not only might we be lonely and unpopular if we don't attain the right body shape but we may also never find a mate.

Addictive behaviour is also played out in this arena. Psychotherapists might link eating disorders to a desire for control in those who feel impotent. Another powerful motivator for those of a certain age is avoiding death. Every nip and tuck and bottle of hair-dye seeks to evade the inevitability of death by hiding the signs of aging. 'Keep young and beautiful!' as we just heard Annie Lennox sing. But if we understand death more widely than just that final last breath; if we understand death as a lack of life, what is a deathly experience? Is it boredom, depression, fear, despair, waste, limitation defeat? Do we seek to avoid those feelings by frantic activity? Buying clothes, going on a diet, having a boob job or spray tan. What is it that keeps us feeling alive and vital?

It is certainly a complex issue. Many sociological and psychological processes are fought on the battlefield of our bodies. But what, if anything, should we make of all this from a Christian perspective?

Well firstly, God created us in God's image and blessed us in that image. In our blissful state of unity with God in the garden of Eden there was no anxiety about our bodies. Only when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and opened up a gulf between God and them did they become ashamed and feel the need to cover their bodies. Only then do they acquire their fig-leaves. Anything which separates us from God we call sin. When we feel ourselves to be separated from God we are left feeling vulnerable and in need of self-fabricated protection. The greater the gulf, the greater the anxiety. If we cannot trust that we reside safely with God then we will find an arena in which to take control of our lives. Our bodies provide one such

arena. The work of faith is reducing the gulf; increasing our trust and dropping the fig leaves in the presence of God.

[Quotes on power-point

The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

John 1.14

Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor. 6.19

'All things are lawful', but not all things are beneficial....whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. 1 Cor 10]

As Christians, the core of our faith is a belief in the incarnation. God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus cured bodies. He proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. These are not spiritual ideals, these are physical acts. The word for love in Greek, *agape*, describes how we behave. It does not describe a feeling, it describes what we do! Jesus ministry was to people's bodies and their souls. Ours is not a faith which seeks nirvana through freedom from this earthly body. Rather we believe our bodies to be temples to the holy spirit which need to be treated as such.

Sadly despite the incarnation being the defining feature of our faith, for much of its history, the Western Christian tradition has insisted that flesh and spirit must be kept apart. A perverse and destructive dualism between spirit and matter has infected so much of the understanding of the church that we have been left with little positive use for the body at all. Body and flesh have been treated in two particular ways as a result.

First, they are simply treated as inferior. So they suffer from neglect in the Christian life. The spiritual life and the world of the mind were thought to be the 'higher' goal. That is where holiness is to be found. In pursuit of this the flesh holds us back, or worse still, leads us astray. This attitude has allowed Christians to indulge in all sorts of terrible abuse of their own and other people's bodies down the ages.

In extremis, this attitude leads to the body being treated as the enemy – the source of all that is fallen and sinful. Holiness therefore required a renunciation of the flesh and its desires. All too easily in Christian vocabulary the word 'flesh' is used negatively. It implies something illicit or forbidden rather than warm, living embodiment. Some of this ambivalence in our tradition is now played out in the arenas of human sexuality and the role of women in the church.

I think that the current obsession with body image is a misplaced response to a spiritual need.

It grows out of a spiritual hunger which we seek to fill by making ourselves popular with others. What need for others if we truly know ourselves to be loved by God?

I think it grows out of spiritual anxiety which seeks control in the midst of chaos.

What need for control if we entrust our lives completely to God?

I think it grows out of a fear of death. What need to avoid death if we believe that death has lost its sting?

But we are only human and laid out in these dilemmas is the whole arena of faith. I leave you with two biblical images, one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

For me the myth of Adam and Eve tells the story. Until we re-enter a state of unity with God, until we experience Eden, we will feel and know our separation from God as a terrible wound and emptiness in our lives. How we deal with that is our life's pre-occupation. Faith is the work of bridging that separation; of living in the way God desires us to live so that we can dare to peel off our fig-leaves in the presence of our creator who made us in his and her image and who blesses us.

My second image is from the book of Hebrews. Keeping body and soul apart impoverishes our spirituality and enslaves our bodies. But the writer of Hebrews assures us that; '[Jesus] frees those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.' We can be released from the tyranny of body image if we dare to trust in our salvation through Jesus Christ.

Praying with the body

I hope that after this evening we might have a sense that our bodies are an intrinsic part of who we are. Our intellect and our emotion only make up a part of who we are so if we do not pray with our bodies then we cut off from God part of our very being. Moving before God can be a way to pray. Shut the door and choose a time when nobody will burst in on you and express through your body those things which are too deep for words. Do you need to curl up before God; be held or rocked by God. Do you need to stamp and flail before God or leap and soar. Should you spend time prostrate or kneeling in God's presence? Your body probably has a story to tell God. Perhaps using your body for prayer could open you to God in a new and helpful way.

Questions to consider

Does body-shape directly influence the way you live your life?

Where do you gain your sense of self-worth?

Keep young and beautiful! If striving for a youthful body is a way of avoiding death, what makes you feel fully alive?

Does a theological perspective make any difference?

What now?

The two paragraphs about the division of body and spirit in the Christian tradition are heavily drawn from 'Spirituality workbook - A guide for Explorers, Pilgrims and Seekers by David Runcorn (SPCK)