

Loving God by Honouring our Bodies

Introduction:

Our bodies are absolutely amazing, wouldn't you agree?

Listen to these mind blowing facts. **Did you know...**

- Your nose can recognise and remember 50,000 different scents.
- There are 160,000 kms of blood vessels in an adult human body.
- The human eye can distinguish about 10 million different colours.
- In a lifetime, your brain's long-term memory can hold as many as 1 million billion separate bits of information.
- When you take one step, you are using up to 200 muscles.

Human fingers are so sensitive to touch, they can feel objects as small as 13 nanometers (a billionth of a metre). That means if your finger was the size of the Earth, you would feel the difference between houses and cars.

- Hearing is the fastest sense to be detected by the brain. Your brain can recognise a sound 10 times faster than the blink of an eye.

King David would not have known such facts, but he had enough of a deep appreciation of his body, to exclaim to God 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well'.

Psalm 139 gives us an intensely intimate prayer celebrating God as the author of every detail of our being. But it is not only celebrating that God knows the workings of our bodies, but that God is also personal and active in sustaining and guiding our lives. God and he sticks with us. And such loving presence reminds us how precious we must be to God.

David certainly comes across as someone who is at home in his body. He has a rich awareness of the goodness of his body and a deep recognition that every part of it comes from the work of God.

There is a story in 2 Samuel 6, where David has arranged for the Ark of the Covenant, a key symbol for Israel of God's presence, to finally be moved to Jerusalem. There is a great celebration and it says, 'David danced before the Lord with all his might, wearing only a light linen garment and the crowds celebrated with him joyfully'.

Unbeknown to him, his wife Michal, the daughter of Saul, was watching him down from her window as they entered Jerusalem. When she saw king David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she was filled with contempt for him.

When David returned home, not surprisingly things quickly blew up: Michal said to him sarcastically and in disgust, 'how distinguished the king of Israel looked today, shamelessly exposing himself in front of the servant girls like any vulgar person might do'. But David replied "I was dancing before the Lord... He appointed me as the leader of Israel, the people of the Lord, so I celebrated before the Lord. Yes, and I am willing to look even more foolish than this, even to be humiliated in my own eyes! But those servant girls you mentioned will indeed think I am distinguished!" And the scriptures close that story with the rather disturbing statement of judgment; And Michal never had children to the day of her death. The implication is that God's favour lies with the one who dances before him with wild abandon.

What sort of a dancer are you?! Have you ever danced with such abandon?!

I am reminded too of Eric Liddell the famous olympic runner. He said, "God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure. "

It is good for us all to meditate on Psalm 139 and make it our own prayer, I hope we can find ourselves more at home in our bodies.

The reality is that most of us don't feel at home in our bodies:

Although we should know better, most of us grow discontent with our bodies. We may not know exactly what a perfect body looks like, but we feel secretly that whatever perfection is, we are far from it.

Each culture creates its own picture of perfection: whether it's the warrior, the mother, the scholar, the fashion model or something else. Some societies reverence the old, seeing in them the embodiments of ancient wisdom and experience. We, on the other hand, seem to hanker after an unattainable picture of youth. We are bombarded with so many images of youthful beauty that we learn to look very critically on our own bodies and the bodies of others.

And so, part of our feeling of not being at home in our own bodies can come from insecurity about our bodies and a poor sense of body image.

But the struggle of not feeling at home in our bodies also goes far deeper than poor body image:

The Bible speaks of us as having a sinful nature as a result of turning away from God. Right at the heart of us is this dark mystery which Paul describes simply in **Romans 7:19**, when he says:

I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

And so most of us have patches of our personal history of which we are deeply ashamed. I am not talking necessarily about great crimes or scandalous sins. I am thinking of those many occasions where we failed to act on our values. We didn't do what we knew to be right and good.

What are we to do with the desires of our sinful nature - lust, envy, revenge, rage, selfishness - which are at work in us and leave us feeling like we can't live up to who we really are?

It is **Jesus' resurrected body**, perhaps more than any other image in Christianity, that is good news for us and our bodies. In the resurrection stories, Jesus draws our attention again and again to his body: 'Look at my hands and my feet' 'See that it is I myself. Touch me and see'.

In Jesus' resurrection, it is not just his spirit but all of him is raised! God affirms the goodness of our bodies and gives us a new confidence that God is indeed powerful to restore us as we live and respond to him.

Romans 8:11 says: And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

So we have to guard against blaming our bodies for the sin and shame in our lives. 'Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you (1 Corinthians 6:19)

From its early origins there have always been Christians who, in their struggle with sin and temptation, particularly with sexual desire, prefer to blame our bodies for falling short. 'It's not my fault, it's my body, my flesh', we say. We falsely assume our spirits, or our souls, are somehow higher and more spiritual and needing to escape from the shameful and degrading cage that is the body. This is a dreadful mistake!

And so there has been a common thread in Christianity where it has been understood that we need to discipline and even punish the body, thinking all the time that this is pleasing to God. The idea has been to whip it into shape, to make our body conform to the higher longings of the soul.

The problem with this is firstly that it doesn't work: It is like wearing a corset: we hide, suppress and deny the ugly bits of our sinfulness, so they are contained

and not allowed to bulge out, but all the while they are still there. Given half a chance they bounce back, they slip out, they break loose.

It is also a denial of the goodness of the body. Unfortunately we are living in times where the pendulum has now swung the other way in our society to an 'anything goes' mentality that embraces any natural impulse as good.

Spiritual Pathway: Loving God by Honouring our Bodies

It is our task to retrieve and reinterpret the practice of honouring our bodies for our own times. This is a vital part of our worship. We must do this in a way that corrects the mistakes of the past.

There are so many forces in society that dishonour the body. If we are unable to shape a way of life that honours the body, we will miss the mark, we won't flourish as we are supposed to.

Bathing:

Not many of us will be used to thinking of bathing as a spiritual act, but it is one of the most fundamental ways that we honour our bodies. Whether we shower or soak in the bath tub, bathing requires an intimacy and care for our own bodies. Times of bathing are opportunities to bless and honour our bodies and to recognise that we are both fragile and vulnerable but we are also sacred. It is like God has put a sign up saying, "Handle with care. You are precious".

Luke's gospel tells a story about an unnamed woman, identified only as a sinner, who enters a house where Jesus was invited to a dinner party and she begins bathing his feet with her tears and wiping them dry with her hair. The host is embarrassed and wonders what kind of person Jesus is to not resist the touch of a sinful woman. But the bold extravagance of her actions becomes a sign not of sinfulness but of a loving intimacy for Jesus. (handle with care)

In John's gospel we see Jesus himself on his knees, bathing the feet of his friends. Again, this is seen as a shocking act, one normally required only of non Jewish slaves and Peter at first tries to resist. But Jesus responds by explaining that their community must be shaped by such acts of generosity: 'If I your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' Here, bathing becomes a sign of community in which each member takes responsibility for the well being of every other. (handle with care)

Attention to our bodies during bathing can help to nurture a sense of the body as worthy of love and care by reminding us that we were created in God's image. I recently heard a story from a woman who remembers that as a teenager she was plagued by outbreaks of acne. One day, when she felt unable to leave the house because of the anguish over her face, her father led her to the bathroom and asked if he could teach her a new way to wash. He leaned over the sink and splashed water over his face, telling her, 'On the first splash, say, 'in the name of the father, on the second, 'in the name of the son' and on the third, 'in the name of the Holy Spirit'. Then look up into the mirror and remember that you are a child of God, full of grace and beauty.' This woman has integrated her father's reverence for the body into her own children's bath time. She sings songs of blessing over each part of their bodies, remembering that they are children of God, made in God's image.

Next time you are bathing, why not try a similar prayer of blessing.

Dressing

Clothing our bodies is another thing we do which we might not usually think of as part of our worship. And yet there is a lot more to it than just covering ourselves and protecting our bodies from the weather. How we dress has long been a source of delight for people. It shapes our identity and is a key way to honour our bodies. It seems that across almost every culture, the more special the occasion, the more careful we are about how we dress ourselves and what our dress says about us.

When I was a boy I grew up with the tradition that we save our best clothes to wear for church - 'our Sunday Best'. This comes from that impulse to take special care with one's appearance when entering God's presence. Overall for me this was a good practice to grow up with and I enjoyed it.

- Church in the late 80s - one of the elders...

How we dress can easily be overemphasised in ways that distorts our worship.

Something that is meant to be worship, becomes a symptom of what is wrong in our society - especially when dressing a certain way becomes more important than gospel values of hospitality to the stranger and solidarity with the poor and inclusion of those on the margins of society.

We can become obsessed with image - when we allow the fashion industry to dictate to us what it means to dress up, we perpetuate values that can divide rather than unite us. We must see the dangers of those destructive influences.

1 Peter 3: 3-4: 'Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewellery or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight'.

And so the practice of dressing, when carefully considered, can be something we do to honour our bodies in worship.

Touch

I heard about a student recently who was living alone in Italy for a year. Living alone, she often went all day without feeling a human touch. She began attending mass every evening in the church of the small town where she lived. It was particularly the ritual of passing the peace that drew her there each day and it was the highlight of the service for her, because it provided a safe space for her to touch and be touched by other people.

Our culture seems confused with what is and is not appropriate way of touching. In our overly sexualised society, when is it right to give a welcoming hug or a gentle reassuring touch without misinterpretation? How might we make room for touch in our church culture so that it is a blessing and a sign of friendship and not awkward or inappropriate.

We are perhaps never more aware of our vulnerability and isolation than when we are ill or in the presence of others who are ill. It is understandable that those who are ill often feel that their bodies have betrayed them. I heard this story from a church in Chicago, about some friends who responded in a profound way when one of them became terminally ill. As he grew sicker, his body first became a stranger and then an enemy to him, it was a source of nothing but anguish. In the last months of his life, he told his friends how he felt abandoned by his body. They began reading about and training themselves in therapeutic touch. They began to gather regularly in his home, to stroke his hands and feet, to touch his skin. The idea was to gently offer him an experience where his body was a source of comfort, not of pain alone. Through these sessions of therapeutic touch, he found himself more able to speak freely about his illness and his inevitable death. Through the practice of touch, his friends found themselves able to respond with compassion rather than fear, with openness rather than denial. And when their friend died, they found comfort in their grief through the healing touch of one another. This group has since gone on to offer

the gift of therapeutic touch to others in need of compassionate attention. In this way, they find themselves able to be present to those who are suffering and to offer comfort that is rooted in a fragility that is shared by all.

Sexuality

The practice of honouring the body is perhaps nowhere more urgently needed than in the realm of sexuality. Our sexuality is a source of both great pleasure and great vulnerability. Because of this, honouring the body means that we will be always moving between affirming the goodness of the body and refusal of anything that diminishes or degrades the body.

A few years ago, when I was a teacher, I heard a story about a group of boys at another school nearby who were discovered to have been competing for points by having sex with girls in their classes. When interviewed many of the girls said that they had felt obliged to participate. Our young people desperately need ways of resisting the coercive power of others over their sexuality. They need communities that honour the body by nurturing the powerful sense of self required for such resistance. We need to find ways of nourishing among us a sense of reverence for our own and others' bodies.

Such reverence can flourish only in homes and communities where sexuality is discussed and celebrated.

When families and communities honour the body, people are formed in freedom, solidarity, and love.

If we had more time this morning we could think about other key areas such as watching what we eat / about fitness.

Conclusion

Our desire for God is not only a desire of our spirit, but also of the body. This flesh that was shaped and formed by God 'knitted together in my mother's womb' was made to long for God.

So let's take seriously loving God by honouring our bodies.

This will not mean that you do not have to continue struggling and working through your shortcomings and difficulties. It means walking with God who loves you through and through in the midst of all your shortcomings. Right here, right now, just the way you are, God is drawing you to himself.