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The yoke of the King of Babylon. One body, many members.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 27. In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the son of Jeziel king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus the Lord said to me, Make yourself straps and yoke bars, and put them on your neck.

Send word to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the sons of Ammon, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon, by the hand of the envoys who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah. Give them this charge for their masters. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, This is what you shall say to your masters.

It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson until the time of his own land comes.

Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave. But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, declares the Lord, until I have consumed it by his hand. So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your fortune tellers, or your sorcerers who are saying to you, You shall not serve the king of Babylon, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you, with the result that you will be removed far from your land, and I will drive you out, and you will perish.

But any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land, to work it and dwell there, declares the Lord. To Zedekiah, king of Judah, I spoke in like manner. Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him and his people and live.

Why will you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as the Lord has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are saying to you, You shall not serve the king of Babylon, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you. I have not sent them, declares the Lord, but they are prophesying falsely in my name, with the result that I will drive you out, and you will perish, you and the prophets who are prophesying to you. Then I spoke to the priests and to all this people, saying, Thus says the Lord.

Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you, saying, Behold, the vessels of the Lord's house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you. Do not listen to them. Serve the king of Babylon and live.

Why should this city become a desolation? If they are prophets, and if the word of the Lord is with them, then let them intercede with the Lord of hosts, that the vessels that are left in the house of the Lord, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem may not go to Babylon. For thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the pillars, the sea, the stands, and the rest of the vessels that are left in this city, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon did not take away, when he took into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon Jechoniah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, and all the nobles of Judah and Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning the vessels that are left in the house of the Lord, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem, they shall be carried to Babylon, and remain there until the day when I visit them, declares the Lord.

Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place. Jeremiah chapters 27-29 form a unit with Jeremiah in conflict with the false prophets. Like the chapter that precedes them, Jeremiah chapters 27-28 have Jeremiah and the false prophets coming into collision over the question of the threats hanging over and the duration of the Lord's judgment upon Jerusalem.

These chapters also belong to what some have called the Zedekiah cluster of narrative material, along with chapter 24, the prophecy concerning the good and the bad figs. Chapter 27 could be divided into three separate sections. The first is Jeremiah's address to the foreign envoys, the second Jeremiah's earlier address to King Zedekiah, and the third Jeremiah's address to the priests and all of the people.

The chapter is set after 597 BC and the first deportation to Babylon. That event is described at the beginning of chapter 24. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken into exile from Jerusalem Jechoniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon.

Jeremiah had been in conflict with the false prophets for quite some time. Previously they had denied that judgment was going to come upon the land. Now their insistence seemed to be that no further threat would arise against Jerusalem and also that the former deportees would soon return.

This claim, we should note, appeals to God's power and commitment, however it is founded upon a very mistaken understanding of the covenant and what it actually entailed. Once again, Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to perform a symbolic action. This time he makes himself straps and yoke bars.

Such yokes would be used for working animals and here it is a sign of submission to the rule of another. On several other occasions in scripture, the yoke is a symbol of covenant. The yoke is also a symbol that Christ takes up for his followers and disciples.

My yoke is easy and my burden is light. At the start of Jeremiah's ministry, he was set apart for a ministry to the nations. In this chapter we see the word of the Lord addressed quite directly to people beyond the land of Judah.

It is likely that the envoys from the other nations were in Jerusalem in order to conspire together against the suzerainty of Babylon in the region. Jeremiah's warning to them is that this effort will not be successful. Their choice is to submit to the king of Babylon and remain in their lands or to rebel and be destroyed.

The Lord addresses them as the one who is sovereign over all human affairs, the one who rules over the world of international politics and also the one who is the creator of all things. The Lord's universal providence is understood on the basis of his being the creator of all things. We encounter a similar statement in Isaiah chapter 45 verses 11 to 13.

Living in Judah and the surrounding nations, it would have been easy to think of yourself as pawns on the great playing field that's dominated by Egypt in the south and by the great powers of the north such as Assyria and Babylon. It is their power that dominates

your thought. They are the ones who shape the affairs of the region and determine how things will play out.

The message of Jeremiah is that this is not the case. The Lord is in fact the one who is sovereign over the entire region. He is the one who is sovereign over the world as the creator of all things.

What happens to these nations is determined not by the king of Babylon but by the Lord himself. He gives a strong warning that they must submit to the king of Babylon otherwise they will suffer the effects of resistance. The threats listed are the things that would naturally come upon a nation that is resisting this great empire.

Famine, pestilence and sword would be the fate of many besieged cities. They must be particularly aware of the danger of listening to their prophets, diviners, dreamers, fortune tellers and sorcerers who are telling them not to serve the king of Babylon. That is a losing proposition and the people who are bringing this message are liars.

However driving home the point that it is not ultimately the king of Babylon who is in charge, in verse 7 we are told that Babylon's own time will come and many nations and kings will make him their slave. The actual rebellion does not seem to have effectively materialised and a number of the kings mentioned here changed sides. The king of Edom turned against Judah in the time of its crisis.

Moab and Ammon seem to have been subdued in 582 BC. Tyre and Sidon seem to have submitted as vassals to Babylon. Jeremiah enacted this message wearing the yoke and he brings the message to Zedekiah the king of Judah too.

It is utterly pointless for Zedekiah and his people to die by the sword, famine and pestilence. If they submit to the king of Babylon they will be spared all of these things. Indeed in submitting to the king of Babylon they will be submitting to the word of the Lord.

Of all of the prophets Jeremiah is peculiarly challenged by false prophets prophesying in the name of the Lord. The Lord has not sent these false prophets yet they continue to bring false words of comfort in his name. They appeal to the authority of the Lord and his word but their words are ultimately empty.

This warning is sent to Zedekiah and a similar one is spoken to the priests and all of the people. The priests in particular seem to have bought into the ideology that taught that Jerusalem was ultimately invulnerable, that the Lord was committed to it in such a way that all of the judgments it had recently experienced would soon be reversed and that there was no real threat of a greater destruction. More specifically the prophets were saying that the vessels that had been taken away from the temple would soon be returned.

Jeremiah speaking in the name of the Lord declares this message to be vain. Indeed it is a very dangerous message. If it leads them not to serve the king of Babylon they will suffer a worse fate in the future.

What they should really be worried about is not the failure of the treasures that they have lost to return, it is the loss of what still remains. If they were true prophets the prophets efforts would be far better invested in interceding to the Lord that the remaining treasures of the house of the Lord not be taken away to Babylon to join the rest. However immediately after raising this challenge the Lord declares by Jeremiah that this too would be futile.

The fate of the remaining treasures and vessels is already determined. They will go to Babylon. All of this is confirmed in the final chapter of the book which seems to allude back to this point here in verses 17 to 23 where the items that are taken from the house of the Lord are listed in detail.

The chapter however ends on a note of hope. The Lord will visit them and he will bring back and restore the items to the temple that were taken away. The Lord not the king of Babylon is the true master of history.

A question to consider, where else in the Old Testament can we see the word of the Lord being directly addressed to foreign nations? Now there are varieties of gifts but the same spirit and there are varieties of service but the same Lord and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same spirit.

To another faith by the same spirit. To another gifts of healing by the one spirit. To another the working of miracles.

To another prophecy. To another the ability to distinguish between spirits. To another various kinds of tongues.

To another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills. For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body though many are one body so it is with Christ.

For in one spirit we were all baptized into one body. Jews or Greeks, slaves or free and all were made to drink of one spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.

If the foot should say because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say because I am not an eye I

do not belong to the body that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear where would be the sense of smell? But as it is God arranged the members in the body each one of them as he chose.

If all were a single member where would the body be? As it is there are many parts yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand I have no need of you nor again the head to the feet I have no need of you. On the contrary the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty which our more presentable parts do not require.

But God has so composed the body giving greater honor to the part that lacked it that there may be no division in the body but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers all suffer together. If one member is honored all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it and God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Corinthians chapter 12 leads into the final section of Paul's treatment of worship in Corinth a section that runs until the end of chapter 14. We must remember again that the themes of the letter to this point are still in play here. In this chapter Paul is again dealing with a situation where some members of the church are overriding or despising others.

In this and the following chapter he is laying the theological foundations that he will build upon in chapter 14 when he moves to tackle specific issues more directly. He will be developing themes of the relationship between the strong and the weak throughout also. The Corinthians had likely raised the issue of spiritual gifts in their letter to Paul.

The word that is used in verse 1 however means spiritual things or spiritual persons. It is not inappropriately related to the teaching on spiritual gifts that follows. However the change in term may be significant.

Paul may be shifting from the Corinthians emphasis to one that foregrounds the gracious gift character of spiritual things and manifestations. He starts off by talking about their former state in paganism when they were pagans or literally when they were Gentiles. They are no longer Gentiles, they are sons of Abraham in Christ.

And during that time they were carried away by mute idols. Theirs was a religion built not around a speaking God but around speechless idols. Pagan spirituality is based around ecstatic events, trances, other forms of altered consciousness, mass psychology and emotional manipulation.

However a religion based around a speaking God is not characterised by the same irrationality. Christian faith is built around the word of the cross. And we should bear in mind the Corinthians distorted sense of what counts as spiritual.

They might see the spiritual manifestations as marks of their own superiority and achievement rather than seeing them as what they actually are. And Paul deflates some of their understanding of what counts as spiritual here. Everyone who unfeignedly declares Christ to be Lord has received the spirit, whether or not they have the more dramatic outward manifestations of him.

On the other hand, no one speaking in the spirit of God will speak against Christ. The most fundamental test of spiritual speech and behaviour is how it conforms to the Lordship of Christ. The true test of true spirituality is not elevated experiences but faithful confession of Christ and his Lordship.

In verses 4-6 Paul presents a Trinitarian pattern. The triunity of the one God unites the church in its diversity. The triune persons are related to the life of the church in their united action but in different ways.

The spirit is particularly connected with the gifts, the spiritual gifts. The Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ, is connected with the varied forms of service. And God the Father is the one by whom all activities are rendered effective.

Elsewhere Paul speaks of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit in ways that distinguish between them in the prepositions that are used of their work. From the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Paul doesn't express an explicit doctrine of the Trinity in his epistles but the presence of a doctrine just beneath the surface can be seen in places like this.

In these verses Paul presents spiritual things as expressions of the one God in his activity of forming his church. The terms he uses may have challenged some of the Corinthians preconceptions. The spirit gives gifts.

It's not about forms of spiritual attainment, forms of personal attainment by which one individual may be elevated over others. Participation in the Lord's ministry is seen in service, not in mastery and superiority and dominance over others. And all the activities in the church, in their varied and diverse character, are all empowered by the one God, not by our own power.

The spirit is given to each for the sake of all. This is not a religion of individual superiority

but of mutual service. There is a great variety of gifts but unity in the one spirit.

The list of the gifts of the spirit that we have in verses 8-10 is not the only list that we have in scripture. We find a similar list in places like Romans chapter 12 verses 4-8. For as in one body we have many members and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. If prophecy, in proportion to our faith. If service, in our serving.

The one who teaches, in his teaching. The one who exhorts, in his exhortation. The one who contributes, in generosity.

The one who leads, with zeal. The one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. The gifts in Corinthians are the more demonstrative and so-called miraculous or supernatural gifts, perhaps because these were the gifts that were most attractive to people with the sort of hangovers from pagan spirituality from which the Corinthians suffered.

They are looking for spiritual pyrotechnics, whereas Christian faith foregrounds the word. However, whether the gifts in question are flashy and extraordinary or seemingly more ordinary and unassuming, all true gifts are empowered by the one spirit. Paul moves from the unity of the spirit to the unity of Christ's body, formed by the spirit.

He speaks of the church as Christ. Christ is undivided, head and body are one. Christ is the head, the preeminent one, the bridegroom of the bride.

But he is united with his body. Christ describes what some have called the totus Christus, the whole of Christ, head and body. Christ is undivided.

The church was baptised into one body by the spirit given at Pentecost, overcoming differences of social status between slave and free, and differences between Jew and Gentile. We're all bound together as one, rather than being individuals competing with each other for status. If a body functioned in a way that pitted each member against each other, it would fail to function, it would break down.

And here Paul describes the way that the church is formed in a way of mutual dependence and interaction. The unity of the church rests upon the event of Pentecost, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But it's also sealed in every individual baptism.

Each person who is baptised participates in the one gift of the spirit that was given to the church at Pentecost. We are all made partakers in the one undivided spirit. And the body is formed of diverse, yet interdependent members.

No part can do without the others, even though there may be real differences in the

prominence, the strength, and the seeming honour of different parts. A part of a body isn't what it is apart from the rest of the body. It is only as it renders its service to the rest of the body and is connected with the rest of the body that it enters into its own true character.

If you were to cut off your hand, it would cease to function as a hand. It could not be a hand apart from the rest of the body to which it is connected. Same with the eye, the nose, the mouth, the foot, or any other part of the body.

Just as the members of a physical body are mutually dependent, so it is with the members of the body of Christ. And Paul deals with the principle of gift here. God gives these gifts to people, not as private possessions.

We are permitted to participate in God's giving process. God gave the spirit to the Church of Pentecost, a single gift of the spirit. And in the spiritual gifts, that one gift of the spirit is represented through the manifold gifts of the different parts of the body.

And in this, God enables us to become participants in the building up of the Church in that one gift of the spirit. God has given gifts to me, so that through me he may give those gifts to others. God has given gifts to you, so that through you he might build up others as well.

These gifts then are not a matter of private superiority, of setting one person over against another and above another. Rather they are gifts for the sake of all, so that all might be built up as God has given through individuals to the whole. They are also gracious ways in which God has made us participants in his giving process.

So just as God has given to his Church, God has given to each one of us ways that we can minister the life of the spirit to those around us. No member can look down on other members of the body, because we are all dependent upon one another. No member can absolutise its own function and leave the rest of the body behind.

We shouldn't try to become each other or envy others for their gifts. Rather we should try and exercise our own gifts in our own station for the sake of the common good. Just as in chapter 7 Paul challenged the mindset of people who thought or seemed to think that they needed to escape their current status in life, their current vocation, their current situational position in order to become true spiritual people and to participate in the grace of God and the ministry of his spirit, so here he wants people to recognise their participation in the work of the spirit in the situation in which they find themselves.

In the Corinthian Church, where the so-called strong were exalting themselves over the weak, Paul teaches that the supposed weaker members of the body are in fact indispensable. Even those members of the Church that seem less strong, less honourable and less exalted, perhaps those members that you would never see at the

front, they are to be treated with a greater honour. The presentable members of the Church, perhaps the people we naturally push to the front, thinking perhaps that they are more eloquent, more gifted, more powerful, more influential, they are not necessarily the best parts of the Church, they are not to be presumed to be the greatest parts of the body.

We cover up the sexual organs, perhaps thinking them less honourable, however in our covering up of them we bestow greater honour upon them than the parts of the body that are prominently on display. This should perhaps further inform our understanding of things such as the covering of the women in the preceding chapter. From a human perspective, some might think that the covering up of the women with the head covering is because they are less honourable or less glorious.

However for Paul, the logic seems to be that because they are more glorious, a greater degree of modesty is required. From a human perspective, we might focus upon those people who are most prominent and think that they are the most important, and by challenging that entire mindset, Paul calls us to reconsider the way that we relate to different people and ministries within the life of the Church. Those who might be more prominent and visible must never delude themselves into thinking that their greater prominence makes them more important.

Understood properly, the body should be characterised by mutual care, with each sharing in what has been given to all, and all sharing in what has been given to each. More generally, this is a vision of a good society, in which great diversity is bound together in mutual dependence and honour. No member is ignored, left behind or dishonoured.

Paul concludes this section by making the object of his illustration explicit. We are the body of Christ collectively, and we are members of it individually. We should note the general movement from the focus on the spirit and the gifts, to a focus on Christ and the order of the body and its ministries, to a focus on God the Father and the activities that he has appointed.

This follows the pattern of verses 4-6. Paul has already described the different roles that people can play in building up the Church as a building, or working on the field of the Lord, in chapter 3. However, all of this is governed by the principle that he will elaborate in the next chapter, the principle of love. A question to consider.

How can Paul's description of how the Church should be here inform our thinking about society more generally?