You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

You can watch this sermon on YouTube <https://youtu.be/v9WsgboJvwU>

At our Plough Sunday services last week we had a visitor. A chap from Yorkshire attended one of our services, afterwards we had a chat. He was from Nidderdale and served as a lay preacher in their benefice of seven parishes.

In my sermon last week I spoke of the farmer who had handed his farm to a young successor. The older man who was retiring gave the young farmer a piece of advice – keep it grass side up. Our visitor told me it reminded him of a time when had taken something over.

It was a business with an annual turnover of £300 million. Which is quite a lot of money. As the new man he had gone clutching an armful of files, a notepad, and no doubt making sure he had a working pen and a spare as well.

The person who was stepping down met him, “I suppose you want a thorough handover?” he asked. “Yes please.”

They sat down. His mentor looked him in the eye, tapped his nose, and said, “It’s all about people.” That was it. It’s all about people.

If you are an avid reader of Women’s Own you may remember a famous interview with Margaret Thatcher when she said something that is often misquoted, “There is no such thing as society.”

Well that’s not the whole story. In the interview she was making a point about what happens when things go wrong, when people lose their jobs, get ill, suffer some form of breakdown, or life just throws a spanner in the works.

What she actually said was, "They are casting their problems at society. And, you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours."

Society only exists, only happens, when individual people make it happen. It is all about people. This is about choices, it is about responsibility, it is about duty.

Society exists when people make choices that make it exist. Take for example the experience of many during the Covid pandemic. These past two years have been hard. I spoke last week of the impact Covid has had on those who work in farming. For many it has been a devastating experience.

But within the suffering there have been signs of hope. Covid presented us as a society with unprecedented challenges. If you cast your mind back to the speed with which the furlough scheme was rolled out, grants for people who are self-employed, the job retention scheme. Yes, we know they weren’t 100% perfect, there were gaps people fell between, there were confusions and mistakes, but overall it spoke of a society that looked after our neighbours – and of that we ought to be both thankful and proud.

St Paul describes the Church in much the same way. It is one body but it is made up of many members. It is all about people. Only people working together can be the Church.

And that’s not the end of the story - because Paul has something else to say. Firstly this new body only happens when people who did not previously belong together come together. This is not just for Jews, not just for Greeks, not just for the poor, nor just for the rich – there is a new order and that order is baptism. In baptism everyone is made equal, everyone is included, everyone is made necessary, everyone has something to contribute.

And there’s more still. Everyone is equal but everyone is not the same. The body needs different parts, each part relies on the rest, there needs to be a diversity of skills and abilities, and a diversity also of views and opinions. As I said at Christmas, it is what Desmond Tutu called the ‘Rainbow people of God’. Our differences make us stronger together.

There are several things in life of which I am proud, but there is one thing which I particularly cherish. When in Northwich we turned the vacant Sexton’s House into a small family centre it attracted a group of teenage mums. These were the ‘hard to reach’ families on the estate. They didn’t visit the local health centre, they avoided the social workers, they kept clear of well meaning statutory agencies.

But they came to our family centre and they played with their babies and drank endless cups of tea. One of our grannies overheard them complaining about the price of baby milk so she asked them why they didn’t breastfeed the babies. They didn’t know how to, so the granny with the teapot got her friends together and they started a breastfeeding class.

The local doctors were amazed, they’d been trying for years, spent thousands of pounds, and got nowhere. They asked me how we’d done it.

“Aha,” I said, “you need a granny with a teapot.”

Now the thing is that only a few weeks earlier that granny has been lamenting that now she was old she didn’t feel useful anymore. She’d been a pillar of the church, run this, organised that, been on several committees. But now she felt useless. She felt she had little to offer. Well God had great plans for her, and he gave her a teapot, and she made a difference. She probably made more difference with that teapot than in all the committees and meetings she’d attended.

Society, community, the Church, it’s all about people. You can look at the magnificent buildings. You can remember the history. You can consider the institution. But at the end of the day in every generation it’s all about people.

What they do. What they don’t do. What they hope for. How they strive to be faithful. How they choose to live. How they choose to spend their time, and their money. What bring them hope. What makes them give up.

There is no such thing as society, nor is there such a thing as the Church, there’s only people – and how they choose to live, and what they choose to do, and how they choose to be.

There was a saying in some parts of the world that Covid has pressed the reset button. Things as they were have gone. Things as they might be are just emerging. If you read the news it all looks pretty gloomy, but look deeper. Look not at the bigger picture, but at the smaller picture, look at what people can do, what people can be, because in many ways we have an opportunity to re-write who we are.

The Church, particularly the Church of England, faces massive challenges. I think it’s fair to say that the church as we’ve known it will never be the same. And maybe we’re feeling like the granny before God gave her a teapot. Maybe we’re feeling dismayed, discouraged, anxious.

But it’s all about people. And it’s in people that God does amazing things.